

WRITING Creative Nonfiction



Instruction and insights
from the teachers of the
Associated Writing Programs

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Becoming the Godfather of Creative Nonfiction

LEE GUTKIND

What is it about the term “creative nonfiction” that makes people want to attack or make unfunny jokes about it—or anyone having any connection with it? Over the past ten years, I have discussed the genre and the meaning of the term at colleges and universities and conferences in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. But wherever I go, there are the inevitable questions and complaints, especially about that first word—*creative*—which seems to insult or infuriate academics and scare journalists to death. “Why can’t my work be creative, too?” they whine. Why are their essays on Milton or postmodernism or their articles concerning the local water authority considered criticism and reportage, respectively, while my prose about cross-country motorcycling or the medical world is artistic and literary?

People sometimes become so indignant that they entangle the terms they want to criticize or attack, confusing, for example, creative nonfiction with “noncreative fiction” or talking with great intensity about the “nonfiction essay”—as if there’s an alternative. Those who are especially clever will observe that creative nonfiction is an oxymoron. Some will realize that nonfiction is also an oxymoron. A couple of months ago, a woman who spotted me at Ronald Reagan International Airport in Washington, DC, began pointing and yelling, “Hey, it’s the uncreative fiction guy!”

The fact that I was recognized by a total stranger in a city hundreds of miles from where I live stems from a four-page October 1997 feature in *Vanity Fair*, “Me, Myself, and I,” by James Wolcott, who had some snide and nasty observations about the term “creative nonfiction” and about me. Wolcott boiled all creative nonfiction down into what he called “confessional writing” and took to task as “navel gazers” nearly any writer who had been the least bit self-revelatory in his work. (Captions read “Never have so many [writers] shared so much

of so little,” and “No personal detail is too mundane to share.”) His definition of creative nonfiction? A “sickly transfusion, whereby the weakening personal voice of sensitive fiction is inserted into the beery carcass of nonfiction . . . to form a big, earnest blob of me-first sensibility.”

Inexplicably, Wolcott zeroed in on the memoir and made it seem as if that was creative nonfiction in its totality, while ignoring the significant information-oriented work done by John McPhee, Annie Dillard, Tracy Kidder, Gay Talese, and many others.

Wolcott reserved an especially interesting title and role for me as “the godfather behind creative nonfiction.” He abhorred the fact that I traveled and talked about creative nonfiction all over the world, that I wrote books about creative nonfiction (He called me a “human octopus”), publish a journal (*Creative Nonfiction*), direct a creative nonfiction writers’ conference, edit a series of books for new writers in creative nonfiction, and teach creative nonfiction in a creative writing program, which, collectively, he maintained, ruined the audience for fiction. Because of the proliferation of these courses, “The short story has become a minor arts-and-crafts skill, like Indian pottery,” he stated.

It was unfortunate that Wolcott had so much to say in such a major publication concerning a subject about which he knew so little. (He had never been involved in a writing program or a writing course.) In truth, creative writing programs have actually legitimized literary nonfiction—made it more important in the literary world than ever before by acknowledging, albeit belatedly, the awesome challenge and intrinsic art of the genre—and indirectly affected, in a very positive way, *Vanity Fair* and Wolcott, himself. Without the new appreciation for (creative) nonfiction as an art form as significant as fiction and poetry, Wolcott’s opinions would be less important, while magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and others might not wield the influence and attract the advertising that enhances profits and prominence.

THE ORIGINS OF CREATIVE NONFICTION IN THE UNIVERSITY

When I started teaching in the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1970s, the concept of an “artful” or “literary” nonfiction was considered, to say the least, unlikely. My colleagues snickered when I proposed teaching a “creative” nonfiction course, while the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences proclaimed that nonfiction in general—forget the use of the word *creative*—was at its best a craft, not too different from plumbing.

Prominent writers crossing genres and adding their talent and prestige to nonfiction was a significant part of the process of legitimizing creative nonfiction as an entity beyond journalism and on the same general level as fiction and poetry.

Vanity Fair wasn't alone in attacking the genre in the late 1990s, however. *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and other major newspapers and magazines made it clear that even though they recognized an explosion in the nonfiction form (mostly memoir) they also predicted a quick demise. And by the way, they hated the term, preferring narrative nonfiction, literary journalism, expository writing, among others. In its precious and traditional simplicity, *The New Yorker* called the creative nonfiction it published by John McPhee, Roger Angell, Jane Kramer, etc., "fact pieces."

Anything but creative nonfiction.

THE CREATIVE STORYTELLER

What does it really mean to be creative? And what is so difficult or terrible to contemplate about the term? Why is it bad to acknowledge that you are trying, as a writer, to show imagination and to demonstrate artistic or intellectual inventiveness? Nonfiction writers aren't boasting or bragging by utilizing the word in describing what we do—and it is not a term or a concept that I or others have coined out of the air. Creative nonfiction—writing nonfiction using literary techniques such as scene, dialogue, description, allowing the personal point of view and voice rather than maintaining the sham of objectivity—is hardly a new idea.

Hunter Thompson (*Hell's Angels*), Gay Talese (*Fame and Obscurity*), Norman Mailer (*The Armies of the Night*), Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*) were introducing literary techniques and personal voice into their nonfiction work in the 1960s—a style then called the "New Journalism." Earlier work by Lillian Ross—and much earlier by George Orwell—could clearly be situated under the creative nonfiction umbrella.

The term was eventually adopted by the National Endowment for the Arts to represent the different styles within the genre (memoir, immersion journalism, etc.), an "official" acknowledgment of the distinction between the way in which the literary or creative essay is written compared to the traditional essay or news report.

This difference has to do with storytelling—employing real-life experiences of the writer or people they know or people they learn about through the techniques of immersion or involvement in a dramatic, often suspenseful sequence—in order to communicate information or

As the chairman of our department put it one day in a faculty meeting while we were debating the legitimacy of the course: "After all, gentlemen [the fact that many of his colleagues were women often slipped his mind], we're interested in literature here—not writing." That remark and the subsequent debate had been precipitated by a contingent of students from the school newspaper who marched on the chairman's office and politely requested more nonfiction writing courses—"the creative kind."

One colleague, aghast at this prospect, carried a dozen of his favorite books to the meeting—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—gave a belated mini-review of each, and then, pointing a finger at the editor of the paper and pounding a fist, stated: "After you read all these books and understand what they mean, I will consider voting for a course called Creative Nonfiction. Otherwise, I don't want to be bothered."

Luckily, most of my colleagues didn't want to be bothered fighting the school newspaper, so the course was approved—and I became one of the first people to teach creative nonfiction on a university level, anywhere. This was 1973.

Over the next quarter century, creative nonfiction courses in creative writing programs began to grow both on graduate and undergraduate levels. Being awarded tenure in the English Department at Pittsburgh in 1979 was another milestone—perhaps another first for literary nonfiction. Now there are many tenure-track positions for writers whose specialty is nonfiction, exclusively. This was no small feat. The practice in English departments and writing programs then was to appoint writers who had "legitimized" themselves by becoming accomplished in fiction or poetry—a recognizable literary art—but who could also teach nonfiction. As the job market tightened in the early 1980s and a few nonfiction positions were posted, an amazing transition occurred: Poets, short-story writers, and composition Ph.D.s who had written articles for newspapers and scholarly journals and who had previously concealed or ignored their journalistic backgrounds, however slight, were suddenly reinventing themselves as creative nonfiction writers.

Some very accomplished poets and fiction writers were taking nonfiction more seriously, however, by actually practicing what others were pretending. John Updike published his first collection of essays, *Assorted Prose*. Diane Ackerman began involving herself in the natural world and writing spellbinding articles for *The New Yorker*, while W.S. Merwin's first memoir, *Unframed Originals*, became a best-seller.

establish a special meaning or idea. Creative nonfiction is different because writers aren't constrained by traditional academic or journalistic straitjackets. Literally or symbolically, we can dye our hair blond, wear earrings in our navels, and allow our own personalities to appear on the page with our ideas and observations—a seemingly special violation to the journalist, who has been locked into the inverted pyramid 5W (who-what-when-where-why) format over the past half century and beyond.

I am not disputing the overabundance of “navel gazers,” as Wolcott put it—writers who are primarily inward and self-obsessed—or the notion that there hasn't been an overemphasized craze for this sort of personal (sometimes too personal) writing as of late. But there's also an explosion of altogether brilliant nonfiction prose being written today by people who can reveal their feelings or the feelings of the people about whom they are writing while communicating compelling information and striking some sort of universal chord. What about *Angela's Ashes*, *A Natural History of the Senses*, *Autobiography of a Face*, *The Professor and the Madman*, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, to name a few?

Journalists have, over the years, been so stifled from being creative that they don't exactly understand what the word *creative* might signify beyond the parameters of fiction. William Zinsser, author of the highly respected text *On Writing Well*, has acknowledged his uneasiness with the phrase *creative nonfiction* because he associates “creative” either with fiction or with writers who “fudge the truth.” Young writers, he fears, will take the word *creative* as a license to fabricate.

Zinsser agrees that nonfiction can be creative when “a writer raises the craft to an art by imposing an interesting shape or organizing idea on it,” which to me is one of many ways in which writers can write with style without sacrificing substance. But clearly he doesn't have much confidence in the intelligence of our young people, if he thinks that students will take creativity as a license to lie.

YOU DON'T MAKE IT UP

In the past couple of years, a number of journalists have been discovered and disgraced for, literally, fudging the truth. In 1997, Stephen Glass admitted to fabricating parts of twenty-seven articles for *The New Republic*, where he worked as a reporter, and for *The New York Times*, *George*, and *Harper's*. He even provided fake supporting material, including self-created Web sites, to outfox his fact checkers. And a columnist for the *Boston Globe*, Patricia Smith, a Pulitzer prize

finalist, admitted to fabricating the people and the quotations in four of her columns in 1999. In one case she made up an entire column about a woman dying of cancer. These reporters, only two examples among many, weren't claiming that they were trying to be creative; they took liberties that were blatantly dishonest. The journalism community must learn to police themselves more carefully—rather than fantasize about the potential damage that can be done in other glass houses.

Unfortunately, however, with so many new people discovering creative nonfiction from so many different orientations (especially in the areas of psychology, literature, and composition), the journalistic, fact-oriented roots of creative nonfiction are often forgotten—or ignored. Writers can become too enamored with the creative part of the term, paying precious little homage to the nonfiction part.

There must be a delicate balance between style and substance. Whether writing memoir or dramatic reportage, creative nonfiction writers must always work as hard as necessary to be true to the facts; there are some creative nonfiction writers who don't care about accuracy or who consider it unimportant. These writers lose credibility when they are writing nonfiction and not paying attention to verifiable information.

I recently participated in an Associated Writing Programs panel in which one woman, writing about a town in Germany during the Nazi era, stated that she wouldn't employ the name of the town because, she said, she was keeping her options open just in case she wanted to change what she was doing to fiction. What is that all about, one wonders? If she doesn't know if she's writing fiction or nonfiction, then she is writing fiction. Readers don't appreciate or deserve such sleight of hand.

John Berendt, author of the best-selling *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, admitted to making up saucy dialogue for a real-life character and creating situations in order to more easily manipulate his narrative. “I call it ‘rounding the corners,’” he explained, adding that he has no regrets because, by doing this, he feels he is giving his readers “a better story.” But it is not a true story and it denotes inexcusable laziness. When confronted with a character who might not have exactly scintillating things to say, a good writer, rather than making up better stuff, will work harder to discover other aspects of the subject that are interesting, like by talking to other people about the character in question, or make better connections between one part of an essay to another, or simply work on getting the character to talk more and reveal himself, rather than resorting to fiction.

At the same time, while facts can be checked and confirmed, all truth isn't verifiable. This is especially important to acknowledge for those writing memoir. Ideas and feelings fished out of a person or unearthed from memory can't be fact-checked. Scenes that are recreated, conversations that have been recalled and recounted from the distant past, will be highly personal and subjective.

But in creative nonfiction we draw the line: We do not make up out-of-the-air information of any kind—for any reason. We do our best to replicate with truth and accuracy exactly what we believe has happened, even if, in the real world, there is a possibility that it hasn't happened in exactly the way we describe it or if other people disagree with our interpretations.

THE SHIFT TO STORYTELLING VALUES

This is not a new idea, historically, but many journalists have become so cemented into the traditional SW form of reporting that they are often afraid and/or unable to try anything different—afraid that they simply don't have the talent or the energy to write and report in a creative manner. The timidity of their editors and the narrow range of their literary perspective have devastated their potential as serious writers. Many of the newspaper reporters who enroll in my M.F.A. classes experience great difficulty writing longer essays—twelve pages or 3,000 words or more, or focusing on one theme. Intellectual investigation is an unmined concept in daily journalism. Reporters have been trained for so long to write short, to dumb down their ideas to a sixth-grade level—and to think in quotes and sound bites—that they can't introduce real characters with intelligent perceptions. It is ironic that journalists like to refer to what they are doing as “stories,”—but they aren't stories; rather they are reports, with a few scenic elements sometimes included.

Which is not to say that the journalistic community hasn't recognized the inevitable shift to a more creative concept of journalism; they are simply not advertising it. Through much of this year I have been mentoring reporters and editors at National Public Radio, teaching a style of journalism in which story or narrative is given much more attention, without a loss in substance, integrity, or verifiable facts. Up to this point, most journalists have maintained that a concentration on story (style) endangered the journalistic integrity of the final product—which is a legitimate danger if the reporter devotes the same amount of time and effort to style and story as in her traditional work. The problem is that most journalists devote most of their efforts to the information-gathering process.

Then they sit down and write their “stories,” basically relying on their skills as writers to be clear, concise, and compelling. It's good when a natural narrative emerges—but not unusual when it doesn't.

By enlisting my help, NPR has symbolically and literally endorsed its commitment to the story form. The organization is authorizing and encouraging reporters to invest extra time and effort to understand and integrate dramatic, suspenseful, compelling story structures within the reports they file. NPR hasn't backed away from the term “creative nonfiction,” while, ironically, *The New York Times*, while pretending that we don't exist, has endorsed virtually every idea that creative nonfiction stands for in an all-encompassing way.

Quite literally, front-page news is now often told in a story-oriented fashion in the *Times*. Here's the beginning of just one story, selected at random, from its brilliant twelve-part series “How Race Is Lived in America,” but you can find them on any day of the week:

It must have been 1 o'clock. That's when the white man usually comes out of this glass office and stands on the scaffolding above the factory floor. He stood with his palms on the rails, his elbows out. He looked like a tower guard up there or a border patrol agent. He stood with his head cocked.

Here we have specificity of description and intimacy of detail, written in the cold staccato rhythm of the poet, while a character has been created and an inner (the character being written about) point of view is established. A few sentences later, the conflict telegraphed in this paragraph is launched:

The white man stood and watched for the next two hours as the blacks worked in their group and the Mexicans in theirs. . . . At shift change, the black man walked away, hosed himself down and turned in his knives. Then he let go. He threatened to murder the boss. He promised to quit. He said he was losing his mind, which made for good comedy since he was standing near a conveyor chain of severed hogs' heads, their mouths yoked open. “Who that cracker think he is?” the black man wanted to know. There were enough hogs, he said, “not to worry about no fleck of meat being left on the bone. Keep treating me like a Mexican and I'll beat him.”

So here we have the other anchors of creative nonfiction—dramatic, compelling story energized by electrifying dialogue. Call it what you want, but it is the epitome of creative nonfiction.

DARING THE LIMITS

It is particularly interesting that creative nonfiction has experienced such an amazing renaissance in the past decade—one that has been dominated in the United States by President Bill Clinton. This is a man who, in my mind, is to politics as creative nonfiction is to literature. In the past half century, no one has charmed and ignited the spirit of Americans as has Clinton, and no one has presided over such an incredible and ongoing economic boom. The Clinton economic miracle has been reflected in the publishing world, which has witnessed an unparalleled profitability—driven by nonfiction in many forms, especially memoir. Clinton's ethics and morals have been questioned and his reputation demeaned—both legitimately and not.

So, too, with creative nonfiction. Memoirists, writers who have accelerated the pulse, expanded the barriers, increased the dimensions of the previously more confining and traditional publishing world, have become characters the media loves to lambaste—also without complete authority. Creative nonfiction writers are “out there,” highly visible, sometimes obnoxiously so, walking the line between truth and reality, style and substance—just like Bill Clinton. So we can make people, especially those traditionalists anchored in the past, feel resentful and angry, as in the case of James Wolcott. We can and often do handcuff emotions to manipulate feelings, not subtly like the poet, but in a very obvious and titillating way.

In this regard I am thinking of Lucy Grealy's poetic and powerful self-deprecation in *Autobiography of a Face* and Kathryn Harrison's humiliating confessions of sleeping with her Presbyterian minister father in *The Kiss*. These writers are walking the edge, testing literary and societal norms, and, for good and for bad, creating excitement and controversy, as did Clinton. I don't condone Clinton's actions nor the liberties of writers anxious to excoriate themselves for personal gain. But I appreciate the spirit of their revelations, their willingness to test boundaries rather than sitting comfortably in the safe spaces of respectability, whining about their lack of prominence, criticizing others who have daringly ventured forth with new ideas and concepts. I would not myself do what Edmund Morris did in creating a fictional narrator in his biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch*, to illuminate the dead fish of the man he was struggling to capture, but I admire his resourcefulness. He created unprecedented interest and stimulated intellectual discourse about a man people revered but knew nothing about. He also made a lot of money.

At its purest form, creative nonfiction is, similarly, nothing else but real—with all of the potential flaws and warts of any real human

being. The media seems to attack Clinton and creative nonfiction writers because he and we are both too difficult and too complicated to figure out. And we can become much too embarrassingly public. We don't fit into the traditional form of reportage. But how can you apply the inverted pyramid 5W formula to a three-dimensional saxophone-playing, politically astute animal like Clinton? Who would want to? That's not the inherent challenge of literature—minimizing larger-than-life characters for the sake of brevity and space.

Journalists have difficulty thinking in more than twelve column inches—a narrow format for an outsized subject. Creative nonfiction writers visualize a world in three multicolored, multiconflicting dimensions.

In a subsequent interview in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wolcott said that he had learned most of what he had picked up about writing working in the classified ad section of the *Village Voice* rather than studying in a creative writing program, and that today all of these writing programs are producing creative writers who are “coddled and swaddled” and who will never get jobs. I am not certain that he is wrong about the value of creative writing programs, which I think are ill-suited for many of the students who support them. But his attitude in the face of ignorance is indicative of the two-dimensional, surface-skimming orientation inherent in magazine and newspaper journalism.

Wolcott also told an interviewer that he was “distrustful of memoir,” which is why he would never write a memoir. But perhaps he and others who are so critical of creative nonfiction are more distrustful of what they might, in fact, remember when they actually started to search their souls and think about their lives with an open and analytic perspective. This is a frightening concept to people unable to face and/or reveal their innermost feelings—or who just don't recognize the value or understand the method in doing so.

That, in fact, is the essence and the meaning of creative nonfiction: the ability to capture the personal and the private and to make it mean something significant to a larger audience, and to provide intellectual substance that will affect readers—perhaps even incite them to action or to change their thinking—in a compelling and unforgettable way.

My thinking was changed by my experience with Wolcott and *Vanity Fair*—incidentally, in a way that James Wolcott might not find great pleasure in discovering. For weeks after “Me, Myself, and I” was published, our subscription inquiries at *Creative Nonfiction* shot up. We got phone calls from Hollywood producers seeking new stories for their movie mills. People were recognizing me in airports, restaurants—and

congratulating me. Although Wolcott's attack caught me by surprise and might be described as mean-spirited, I believe, in retrospect, that the attention he generated and the controversy it triggered actually fortified the cause and elevated the discourse surrounding high-quality creative nonfiction literature, which is why it is important to remember it now.

In the end, I discovered the truth in Oscar Wilde's observation, found in the first chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." And I have James Wolcott to thank for it.

III

Creative Nonfiction Reader