CHAPTER 1

Defining Creative Nonfiction

Defining something by what it's not is both unsatisfying and perilous. Hundreds of writers and scholars have made this point about the kinds of writing featured in this book. We'll agree that creative nonfiction is an inadequate term for fact-based writing with literary qualities, yet we use it anyway, for reasons we'll explain. We can say that creative nonfiction is supposed to be true (although what "true" means is not at all clear and "facts" can often not be verified). It is what fiction isn't, except very often it reads like a story. It isn't journalism, except when it is (and is then called "new journalism," or "the new new journalism," or "literary journalism"). The writer usually appears as "I," with a strong personal presence (although there are some pieces in which the writer is absent as a character). We can say that creative nonfiction is prose (except when it's mixed with graphics). Nearly every supposition about creative nonfiction can be countered with an example in which it is just not so. Complicating definitions further is the welter of subgenres crowding beneath the creative nonfiction umbrella, diverse in length, topic, approach, and purpose.

One unarguable characteristic of creative nonfiction is a strong authorial voice and style. Even if the writer doesn't make a personal appearance, we can tell that a distinct individual has produced those words—and that he or she is yelling or whispering. Unlike types of writing that aspire to objectivity, concealing that a person produced them, works of creative nonfiction wear their making and makers on their sleeves. Still, we assume their writers are making every attempt to tell the truth. It is prose with a narrative
trajectory of some kind, writing with a teller. It is prose in which how something is said is as compelling as what is said.

Nobody much likes the term creative nonfiction. The challenges are many:

- Doesn’t all nonfiction require the writer to be creative? Isn’t everyone creative?
- What is creative as opposed to uncreative, anyway?
- Why don’t they just call it a memoir (or essay or article or history or prose poem or new journalism or whatever it is)?
- Why don’t they come up with a better term? What about literary nonfiction? Fictional nonfiction? Nonboring nonfiction?

Oh, people have tried to devise that alternative label. Most of the terms are just too specific; they don’t encompass creative nonfiction’s many subgenres or take into account the pieces that cross several subgenres. The term literary nonfiction is sometimes used interchangeably with creative nonfiction, but it just hasn’t stuck. This is mainly because universities with creative writing programs have adopted “creative nonfiction” as a course of study or major emphasis. The more people study creative nonfiction in college, the more standard becomes the use of the term.

Literary nonfiction is actually a more accurate term, since it does connote all of the stylistic and aesthetic elements that make creative nonfiction what it is. The term creative nonfiction, on the other hand, implies that thin line between fact and fiction. If newspaper journalism is too creative, for instance, we assume that it’s taking liberties with the facts. “Creative” admits to a bit of open-endedness in the requirement that the writer hew to “just the facts.”

A Visit to the Bookstore

A slew of subgenres come together to make up that big hodgepodge that is creative nonfiction. Memoir, personal essay, narrative journalism, the poetic or lyric essay, travel and adventure essays, literary journals, nature and environment writing, profiles, the nonfiction novel, cultural critiques, and even some reviews all come under its heading. Yet much creative nonfiction falls under more than one of these subcategories. Go into your standard bookstore and you rarely find a section expressly for creative nonfiction. These books are scattered all over the store, by subject; they’re found under sociology, architecture, travel, political science, and on and on—and often they don’t quite belong there. A memoir about a child who travels widely across several continents might end up in travel, biography, African American studies, essay—who knows? Although a book may be less “about” New Zealand and more about the people the writer meets there, it may well be found among the travel guides. In most stores, and in
most libraries, there is no simple creative nonfiction place where readers can find the book. The venerable New York Times Book Review divides its reviews simply into “fiction” or “nonfiction.”

One way to see what is and what isn’t creative nonfiction is to wander around that bookstore. Let’s say we go in looking for Frank Conroy’s memoir, Stop-Time. Stop-Time is the story of Conroy’s childhood and is widely admired for the beauty of the writing and the honesty of the story. (An excerpt from this book is on page 241.) The book’s jacket subtitles it “The Classic Memoir of Adolescence.” You might find Stop-Time in the literature section (if there is one)—or in the essay section (if there is one). But it may well turn up in the biography section, along with all of the movie stars’ and politicians’ bios, most of which are not creative nonfiction. Memoirs are often sorted in with biographies, which are usually written by historians or journalists. Most biographies don’t include either the writer’s direct presence or reflections by the writer. They focus less on creating an aesthetically lively artifact than on presenting information. Their main goal is not to move or change readers but to inform them in a way their writers will hope make money.

Stop-Time, on the other hand, is clearly told as a story with dramatic ups and downs and includes the author’s feelings and insights. The book moves, often, very close to the perspective of a twelve-year-old—Conroy lets us see his world through the eyes of the child he once was:

The crowd was silent, watching me. I took a deep breath and threw, following the fall of the yo-yo with my eyes, turning slightly, matador-fashion, as it passed me. My finger caught the string, the yo-yo came up and over, and missed. Without pausing I threw again. “Second time,” I yelled, so there would be no misunderstanding. The circle had been too big. This time I made it small, sacrificing beauty for security. The yo-yo fell where it belonged and spun for a moment. (A moment I don’t rush, my arms widespread, my eyes locked on the spinning toy. The Trick! There it is, brief and magic, right before your eyes! My hands are frozen in the middle of a deaf-and-dumb sentence, holding the whole airy, tenuous statement aloft for everyone to see.) With a quick snap I broke up the trick and made my catch.

This piece clearly attempts to capture the emotion of a moment in time. It features a child’s game. It doesn’t want to convince us that the yo-yo is a worthwhile toy, or tell us the history of yo-yos, or give us the physics of a yo-yo’s spin. Certainly there is nonfiction that does just that. From this one paragraph of Conroy’s, we get the sense that this piece is a story, a narrative. If we didn’t know better, we might think it was fiction, but since this book labels itself a memoir, we must assume that what Conroy is telling us is fundamentally true.

Here’s another example. Wandering down the Travel aisle, we come across the book The Global Soul by Pico Iyer. Iyer, who was raised in India, educated in Britain, and now lives in Japan, often writes of the way the world is becoming a single global nation. Because he often writes
about being in transit, with pieces set in different countries, his books nearly always get filed under Travel. Yet Iyer’s books will never tell you which hotel has the best rates or which highway has the least traffic, even though they are probably perched right beside the travel guides.

How can you tell this without reading the whole book? Flip to nearly any page of *The Global Soul* and you’ll be greeted by an “I.” (And it is a kind of greeting, creating a sense that the writer trusts the reader enough to reveal himself.) Glancing through the book, you’ll see that along with its reflections, there are plenty of facts: the airport in L.A. has its own $10-million office, Toronto is the most multicultural city in the world, and in 1930, Atlanta was the second-largest city in the world in terms of office space. You won’t see facts like these in *Stop-Time*, yet both are works of creative nonfiction. While Iyer imparts all manner of random information, the book is not mainly about the facts, and people don’t read it for the facts alone. They read it to enjoy good stories set in all kinds of places, or because they like the cleverness of the book’s structure, or because of the writer’s background and sense of humor. But someone who wanted to find out the best museum in Atlanta would probably not pick up Iyer’s book—it would just be too opinionated, stylistic, scattered, and personal.

Finally, you might be looking for a collection of essays by novelist Leslie Marmon Silko. (Her essay “Uncle Tony’s Goat” is found on page 666.) Her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* focuses upon various aspects of contemporary Native American life and mythology. It also includes a number of pieces about environmental catastrophe. Where in the bookstore might you find it?

Logically, *Yellow Woman* would be found in the essays section—but this is rather unlikely. It will probably turn up in the sociology, social issues, or Native American sections. It may even be shelved beside Silko’s novels in Fiction. If you were a casual browser, Silko’s book might easily be overlooked.

**What Creative Nonfiction Is Probably Not**

So now that we’ve acknowledged the lack of consensus about what creative nonfiction is and where it belongs, we can move on to what it isn’t. It isn’t traditional newspaper journalism, or logical argument, or academic examination, or a business report. A creative nonfiction writer doesn’t aim necessarily to persuade or inform the reader but to move her. The goal isn’t to relay facts in an objective tone—precisely the opposite. People read creative nonfiction not because they have to but because they want to. They read it not to exhumate information or ideas (although they may well) but rather for the quality of the reading experience itself.

Despite the use of poetic lyricism and fictional scene, creative nonfiction is not a fabrication, a

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What Creative Nonfiction Is Probably Not

fiction. It is supposed to be true to the author's best ability. The story and people in creative nonfiction are based upon actual events, people, and information. The complications of relaying the truth and working through the black, white, and grey areas of "fact" haunt us (and taunt us). When a writer decides what "truth" is, he is going through a very personal process of intuition and evaluation. Since a written work is not reality itself, and since art requires imagination, how does a writer tell a true story in an artful, honest manner? There is no simple answer to this riddle.

Creative nonfiction makes no pretense of objectivity; the writer admits that she is coming from her own point of view. Writers want to bring readers into their worlds. Even when we want to repulse readers, we still want them to pay attention. While the distance between reader and writer is narrowed in the moments of reading, this doesn't necessarily mean that the writer is revealing details of her own personal life. The nitty-gritty of the writer's life may not enter into the piece at all. The writer's persona is there, though—we are aware of this person, this voice. The voice and style are what make a piece personal—not the confession of intimate knowledge or experience. Since a written work is not reality itself, and since art requires imagination, how does a writer tell a true story in an artful, honest manner? There is no simple answer to this riddle.

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Creative nonfiction even allows for literary license: reconstructing scenes and dialogue, even reporting what a subject is—or might be—thinking. The ultimate question might be: Why does this form even exist? Why not just write fiction? Or journalism?

It exists because it has to. Creative nonfiction is more than just "using the real names." It allows the writer to do things that can't be done in either fiction or journalism—it breaks through walls on all sides.

The diarist and scholar of the essay Carl Klaus has observed that the essay has a dual nature: it is a story of events that is also a story of the writer's mental journey. Creative nonfiction usually displays a kind of self-consciousness—a need to comment on the process of writing "reality" and a need to examine the writer's own position in and upon the events. This compulsive drive toward honesty is understood only by the individual writer; he may simply need to tell the story in that way, finding fiction too masked and too defined by its own genre conventions.

Creative nonfiction writers usually feel the need to explore an idea in a direct and complex way—in a manner that doesn't generally take place in the always-show-never-tell environment of fiction and that is usually too limited by the space and authorial restrictions of journalism. Virginia Woolf said that this "fierce attachment to an idea" is the essay's "backbone." For many writers, chasing an idea is compelled by a need to right a wrong, to reform. "When I sit down to write a book," George Orwell said, "I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I
write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing." Creative nonfiction nearly always pleads for understanding, whether it be of a social problem or something as seemingly mundane as the isolation of childhood.

Lawrence Weschler, a complex and unusual essayist, explained why he writes creative nonfiction:

The part of my sensibility which I demonstrate in nonfiction makes fiction an impossible mode for me. That's because to me the world is already filled to bursting with interconnections, interrelationships, consequences, and consequences of consequences. The world as it is is overdetermined: the web of all those interrelationships is dense to the point of saturation. That's what my reporting becomes about: taking any single knot and worrying out the threads, tracing the interconnections, following the mesh through into the wide, outlying mesh, establishing the proper analogies, ferreting out the false strands. If I were somehow to be forced to write a fiction about, say, a make-believe Caribbean island, I wouldn't know where to put it, because the Caribbean as it is is already full—there's no room in it for any fictional islands. Dropping one in there would provoke a tidal wave, and all other places would be swept away.

As for the option of writing journalism instead—well, that's not an option. "Essays belong to the animal kingdom," said Edward Hoagland, "with a surface that generates sparks, like a coat of fur, compared with the flat, conventional cotton of the magazine article writer, who works in the vegetable kingdom, instead." The forms are entirely different, as this book will, we hope, make clear.

Creative nonfiction allows for a certain looseness of exploration. Some writers (like both of us) are attracted to creative nonfiction for its very lack of definition. Over 250 years ago Samuel Johnson defined the essay as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition." This very irregularity is what makes creative nonfiction so much fun to write, if the writer is comfortable with that openness.

**Creative Nonfiction Referenced in This Chapter**


**Works about Writing and Literature**

