



The term ‘creative nonfiction’ was coined in the US in the nineteen seventies to describe a kind of nonfiction writing that was gaining significant traction, but did not fit the existing genres. It was too subjective to qualify as journalism, too wide-ranging for memoir, too idiosyncratic to fit within the boundaries of the essay, lyric or otherwise, although it often contained elements of all of the above. Some of the most interesting writing of the time was being produced in this form. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, a chilling account of a murder published in 1966, used techniques more commonly employed by writers of crime fiction. Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey were redefining nature writing. Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer were producing non-fiction that defied the conventional categories. In order to make such writing eligible for financial grants, creative nonfiction was formally adopted in 1983 as a literary genre by the National Endowment of the Arts, an organisation which until that time had offered grants only for fiction and poetry.<sup>1</sup>

It is the word ‘creative’ that seems to irritate people, the inference being that other forms of nonfiction are not creative. Indeed in Australia we manage quite well, as far as grants and literary awards go, with the term nonfiction, although literary nonfiction is a publishing category, as distinct from the sportsperson’s memoir and the latest cookbook. ‘Creative’ is one of those words that has become bland and generic through over-use, but as a descriptor it signals a category that is less exclusive than Literary nonfiction.

In its simplest definition, creative nonfiction uses the tools of fiction to make a factual piece of writing more accessible and entertaining. Characters are developed through dialogue and actions, events unfold along a trajectory that utilises dramatic tension, the narrator is often an intrinsic part of the story. As a textbook on the basics of the form you can’t go past *Keep it Real*, subtitled *Everything You Need to Know About Researching and Writing Creative Nonfiction*. Written by a group of writers and edited by Lee Gutkind, it outlines the parameters of creative nonfiction in short alphabetical chapters: D for Defamation and Libel, F for Facts, H for History in Nonfiction Narrative, L for Lyric Essay, M for the Memoir Craze, T for Truth, and so on. T for Truth offers the crux of the genre:

...creative nonfiction also explicitly engages the concept of truth, both emotional and literal, and thus the writer of creative nonfiction is bound, by an implicit and sometimes explicit contract with the reader, to make sure the architecture of his story is based on authentic and reasonably verifiable experience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> p12 *Keep it Real*, ed. Lee Gutkind, W.W. Norton & Co. LTD, 2008

<sup>2</sup> p149 *Keep it Real*, ed. Lee Gutkind, W.W. Norton & Co. LTD, 2008



It seems that one of the reasons for the growth of creative nonfiction is a hunger for ‘true’ stories, and a need by the purveyors of those stories to tell them in a way that allows some of the freedoms of fiction while not attracting accusations of libel or the undying hatred of the people one has portrayed.

This is one of the most important aspects of creative nonfiction. How a writer chooses to deal with other people’s lives is an ethical issue for which there are no simple solutions. For one writer the importance of telling the story will outweigh the damage it will do to relationships, for another the integrity of the story is sacrificed in order to avoid hurting people. (Of course writers of fiction are not immune from these difficulties, since many readers assume that if a novel has a remote resemblance to the author’s own life then it is a verbatim account with the names changed). And the truth can be distorted as much by what a writer leaves out as by exaggeration or invention.

Apart from the notorious unreliability of individual memory, narrative trajectory can call for a rearrangement of chronology, or the inflating of a minor episode for dramatic impact. Those of us who have grown up in storytelling families will be familiar with the way in which an event is exaggerated for comic effect, and refined through retelling until it bears little resemblance to what actually happened, but has nevertheless entered family folklore. The story becomes an artefact with its own kind of truth.

In *Running in the Family*, the story of his exotic and eccentric Singhalese forbears, Michael Ondaatje writes of his mother – ‘She belonged to a certain type of Ceylonese family...If anything kept their generation alive it was this recording by exaggeration...An individual would be eternally remembered for one small act that in five years had become so magnified he was just a footnote below it.’<sup>3</sup>

*Running in the Family* is a wonderful example of creative non-fiction, but it is doubtful whether a lot of the events Ondaatje recounts happened exactly as he tells them, limned in mythology and polished with a poet’s sensibility. But he flags this to the reader – I am going to tell you stories of self-mythologising people, dreamers and alcoholics and liars, and the stories they told about each other – and so keeps his contract of truthfulness.

The terminology turns slippery when ‘creative’ translates as ‘making things up’, when a reader believes that what he or she is reading equates with what really happened, and discovers that the writer has taken liberties with the truth. Every few years a scandal ripples through the publishing world, a writer is put in the stocks for misleading the reading public, and the argument about where the line should be drawn between fiction and non-fiction erupts anew.

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<sup>3</sup> p169 *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje, Picador 1983



The boundaries of the genre continue to be tested and stretched. It is the nature of creativity to push boundaries and break genres, which is why the term creative nonfiction is a legitimate one. In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields makes a radical claim for the right of the writer, in the pursuit of authenticity, to appropriate, to exaggerate, to value emotional truth over literal truth. He challenges our assumptions of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’.

**192**

The line between fact and fiction is fuzzier than most people find it convenient to admit...For imagination and memory are Siamese twins, and you cannot cut them so cleanly apart. There is a good case for arguing that any narrative account is a form of fiction.

**389**

In a work of nonfiction we almost never know the truth of what happened. The ideal of unmediated reporting is regularly achieved only in fiction, where the writer faithfully reports on what’s going on in his imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Writers have always invented the forms that will carry the stories they want to tell. Terms like creative nonfiction are provisional labels that serve a purpose in the shifting ground of contemporary writing. An emerging genre for which we don’t yet have a name is the non-linear narrative that slips between fiction and nonfiction without signalling which is which. It offers instead a stereoscopic view that, when brought into focus, creates a multi-dimensional narrative, assuming the reader will recognise that truths are sometimes better revealed in the borderlands where genres become transparent.

While publishers, readers and booksellers prefer labels and categories to describe the texts packaged between book covers, writers will continue to wander in the anarchic realms of storytelling, constructing tales from whatever is to hand.

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<sup>4</sup>pp65 and 132, *Reality Hunger*, David Shields, Penguin 2010