

Kept Secret

The Half-Truth in Nonfiction

EDITED BY JEN HIRT AND TINA MITCHELL

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* opens with her mother's admonition: "You must not tell anyone." But of course she does tell, as narrative must. Jen Hirt and Tina Mitchell's timely, finely tuned collection gives us entry into the most confidential of matters, nonfiction's divulged secret.

—MARCIA ALDRICH

author of *Companion to an Untold Story*

Kept Secret is an engaging collection of essays about what we reveal and when we reveal it, how we shape and are shaped by our memories, and the varied ways we all tell true stories about ourselves and others. All grapple with the full truth of half-truths in ways that make a reader think and feel more deeply. The short interviews that follow each essay offer additional insights as well as the writer's intentions; together, they create a kaleidoscopic and yet transparent view of how nonfiction works when it works really well.

—ANNA LEAHY

coauthor of *Generation Space: A Love Story* and author of *Tumor*

In *Kept Secret*, Hirt and Mitchell have gathered essays and interviews that untangle secrets, be they public or private. Wide-ranging in form—brief, fragmented, lyric, journalistic, experimental, narrative—at the center of this rich collection of voices is a mystery as elusive as an irradiated glow in the dark, as necessary as the heart of truth itself.

—KAREN SALYER MCELMURRAY

author of *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey* and coeditor of *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia*

Jen Hirt is an assistant professor at Penn State Harrisburg. She is the author of the memoir *Under Glass: The Girl with a Thousand Christmas Trees* and coeditor of *Creating Nonfiction: Twenty Essays and Interviews with the Writers*.

Tina Mitchell is an adjunct instructor at University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She is the founder of *The Turnip Truck(s)*, an evolving graphic landscape for essayists, artists, and theorists interested in the dialectics of the human and its environments.



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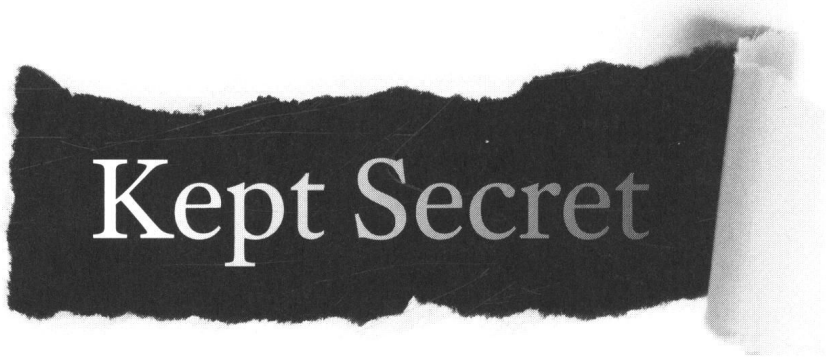
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Hirt and Mitchell

Keep It Secret





Kept Secret

THE HALF-TRUTH IN NONFICTION

Edited by Jen Hirt and Tina Mitchell

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Kept Secret

. . .

*To Paul and Iván
and everyone who knows
the art of the secret*

. . .

There are two kinds of secrets: Those we keep from others, and those we hide from ourselves.

FRANK WARREN, *PostSecret*

One secret is liable to be revealed in the place of another that is harder to tell, and the substitute secret when nakedly exposed is often the more appealing.

EUDORA WELTY, *One Writer's Beginnings*

Introduction

THE FIRST TIME THE PHRASE “KEPT SECRET” APPEARED IN PRINT WAS IN A fifteenth-century French novel about knights and romance and chivalry. It referenced a passion-filled relationship that was, obviously, a secret kept from friends and enemies. That trend continued for centuries, through plays and poems and prose. And even today, it is the category of love—adultery, crushes, stolen kisses, one-night stands, illicit lovers—that often comes to mind when someone mentions keeping a secret. Take for example *PostSecret*, Frank Warren’s 2005 compilation of hundreds of anonymous postcards that each revealed a secret. Many were about love, unrequited relationships, or fetishes.

How interesting, then, that only a handful of the essays in this anthology mention desire or sexual relations as the source of the secret, and both whisper around the elements of shame, not true love. Samuel Autman’s “Invisible Nails” narrates his coming out under the judgment of a religion pressuring a conversion from homosexuality. Robin Hemley’s “Reading History to My Mother” is about his mother’s sudden revelation, late in life, of a rape kept secret for decades. But it’s also an essay about Hemley’s decision to keep the name of the alleged rapist a secret—authorities (and readers) will never know who did this to his mother.

The rest of the essays have little to do with the traditional topic of secret desire. Is this a trend in creative nonfiction? We think it is. Today's creative nonfiction secrets are more sophisticated and nuanced; they reveal themselves so perfectly via the essay, the genre that is simply "an attempt," as the word originally meant. We think secrets are an attempt to hide what we find shameful, or to become someone we're not, but they are also an attempt to preserve relationships, to deflect grief, to avoid punishment, and to shape perception and thereby reality. They are a way of knowing, and a way of reflecting. Secrets also attempt to solidify a bond between the teller and the keeper. They write their own pact: *If I tell you this, you can't tell anyone*. So what happens, then, when in the course of creative nonfiction's trajectory, writers decide to share their secrets (or parts of those secrets) as widely as possible? Are they still secrets? When someone *tells* a secret, does it get woven into the larger fabric of oral history?

The historian Joan M. Jensen answers "yes" to that last question in "Telling Stories: Keeping Secrets," an article about the struggle historians face in getting rural farm women to reveal secrets in oral history projects. Jensen observes, "Storytelling, and its more modern equivalent oral history, is an old tradition. So, too, is keeping secrets. As historians, our job is to tell stories and to tell secrets. The problem is how to decide which stories to tell and which secrets to keep. Which stories become ours to tell? Which must remain secret?"¹

The question of "which stories become ours to tell" is one creative nonfiction writers wrestle with constantly. Some of the essays in this collection avoid that problem simply because the writer is revealing his or her own secret—it's always been the writer's secret to tell. Others, however, reveal someone else's secret. And some keep the secret. When a secret is kept, or an open secret is not discussed, can we hear the silence ring half-true? Or do psychic blind spots truly keep us from seeing the elephant in the room?

Questions like these, all on the compelling status of the secret in nonfiction today, got us thinking—what if there were an anthology where each essay contained secrets, lies, or half-truths? Adding to our intrigue was the idea that secrets can keep us from the truth, the foundation on which creative nonfiction is built, no matter how precarious that foundation may be. Here we cross paths with oral historians, who are often recording stories (and secrets) told by the

1. Joan M. Jensen, "Telling Stories: Keeping Secrets," *Agricultural History* 83, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 437–45.

displaced, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. Many oral historians do this as an antidote against “the official” version of history; others do it to preserve all histories.

Keeping the idea of oral histories, secrets, and the art of creative nonfiction in mind, we think it is time for creative nonfiction writers to embrace the other, even older connotation of the Old French *essai* (“to try”), which is the connotation of “trial.”² In a legal trial, a lawyer, like a writer, weighs probabilities to test and ascertain many sides of the same story. And like jurors, readers return a verdict. Commenting on her essay “Leaving Duck Creek,” Mary Clearman Blew explains, “The nonfiction writer searches the time capsule for clues like a detective in a crowd of criminals and then describes for her readers what she knows and what she suspects.” Through this detective work, the writer is able to get to the heart, or the truth, of the essay. While the truth may inspire us to make confident statements and proclamations, secrets, lies, and half-truths inspire us to hunker down and look harder for clues in the corners where no one else is looking. Eventually, we find what we’re after.

Secrets inspire not just content, but also craft. This unique and shared experience can take any form—from humorous to shocking, from lyrical to researched, from brief to epic. As editors, we wanted to showcase this range, because just as we know that people keep secrets for a myriad of reasons, so too will they need a myriad of prose structures as examples for how to tell a secret. Thus, for over a year, we scouted the literary magazines for this theme and its variations on style. We solicited the equivalents of literary troublemakers and trespassers who had a secret. In addition to the essays, we convinced contributors to answer questions about the craft and ethics of secrets in true stories, which often led authors to reveal more secrets they had stashed in a backpack. Or in some cases, like Jo Ann Beard’s interview, she playfully keeps the secret.

The word “secret” comes from the Latin *sēcrētus*, meaning to separate or divide. A secret is something we split off from our normal day-to-day interactions.

2. The commonplace meaning of “essay”—a short piece of writing on a particular subject—obscures its original meaning as a kind of critical assessment, judgment, or test. Etymologically, “essay,” a variant of the Middle English (and modern) “assay” (from the Old French “assai,” a test of, or a testing, also the merit of something or someone), goes back to the Latin noun “exagium,” which means “weighing” and the verb “exigere,” which means “to ascertain or weigh,” according to the *Oxford American Dictionary*.

We divide the world into who knows and who does not. We weigh the consequences of revealing the secret. How will the revelation separate us from those who did not know but now know? We also frame secrets, as well as half-truths, with ways of telling. In “Three Takes on a Jump,” Jill Christman shows us the three ways to tell a family story that was never really a secret, but the variations conceal the truth. Through her retelling, she discusses “shareability,” the idea that, over time, witnesses corroborate and reorganize information in order to represent a traumatic or startling event in a form that is easier to share. As Christman explains in her interview, “The story we think we know has more to do with the telling, and retelling, than it does with memory.”

In contrast to the story constructed through shared memory, which becomes the collective memory unless someone questions it as Christman has done, Jo Ann Beard questions her own memory. In “Maybe It Happened,” Beard shares a foundational moment of her childhood with a carefully planned repetition of “maybe,” “it’s possible,” “perhaps,” and “it’s likely.” She does this because memory is fallible, and the memory of secrets is dangerously fallible. Everything is a half-truth. She knows the language of half-truth and teaches it to us through her essay.

Beard shows us that even a half-truth can be fully told through creative nonfiction. How is that possible? It’s not the revelation of facts that completes an essay; it’s the artistry, the *way* it is told, not so much *what* it is telling. Remember that a secret is often whispered. We lower our voices, ask our confidante to lean in, cup our hands to cover the space between lip and ear. Or we close the door, or invite the friend for a walk outside, or say “I’ll tell you, later when we’re alone.” This is where creative nonfiction secret-sharing departs from the secrets revealed in oral histories. Historians might attempt to amplify the secret they’ve gleaned from an interviewee. Essayists might attempt to keep an element of the whisper.

Given our faulty memories and our love of style, some essayists are moving toward the designation of “free memoir” or “free essay,” like “free verse,” which defines creative nonfiction that is free to borrow (sometimes quite liberally) from the rules of fiction in order to fill in the gaps of accurate memory. Other writers are prefacing their memoirs with introductions that make it clear what is true and what is exaggerated and what, in some cases, was actually made up. Many readers would likely be wildly disappointed if some of the writers in this collection believed the “creative” aspect of “nonfiction” gave them license to *create* secrets rather than *shape* secrets.

Perhaps it is ironic, then, that beyond the text, a secret can only be a secret if it is *created*, whether that be an individual consciously labeling something as a “secret,” or whether it be social and political institutions invoking grand narratives that naturalize social norms and force “others” to live in a state of repression and secrecy, or face persecution. In either case, it takes a brave writer to untangle the knot between the personal, historical, and institutional and get at the truth, as we see in all the essays in this collection. In writing about secrets, these writers illustrate the democratic nature of creative nonfiction and help us have a richer, more inclusive history.

But inclusion, of course, is gendered. In “‘Oh, No! It Would Not Be Proper to Discuss That with You’: Reflections on Gender and the Experience of Childhood,” historian Jean Barman argues that when adults are interviewed by ethnographers in order to reveal long-held stories and secrets from childhood, there is a significant difference in how men tell their stories compared to how women tell their stories. Men, says Barman, will cast themselves as the main actor in the story. Women, in comparison, will frame their stories “within the context of others.” Barman concludes with advice for ethnographers and researchers who use the methodology of oral histories: “To understand the childhood of a single person, we must understand both the culture that he or she experienced as a child and the culture perceived as existing at the time that the individual is sharing his or her experience of childhood.”³

Skilled writers of creative nonfiction figured this out long ago—understanding our childhood secrets requires us to have the ability to write two things: the narrative about the long-ago childhood as well as present-day reflection, interpretation, and insight. But unlike the female participants in Barman’s project (many of whom were reluctant to share information because they were overwhelmed by the strictures of social norms), the female writers in this collection have long seen those social norms from the inside and the outside, and as accomplished writers, they provide vivid examples of how to understand dual

3. Jean Barman, “‘Oh, No! It Would Not Be Proper to Discuss That with You’: Reflections on Gender and the Experience of Childhood,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 53–67. Barman conducted her research within a larger project, the Canadian Childhood History Project, which sought, in part, autobiographies written by children about their immediate childhood. She also interviewed adults regarding their private school educations in Canada, which is where she noticed the gendered retelling difference.

cultures—the one in which the secret originally existed, and the one in which they reveal the secret, in an essay, to readers. Leslie Jamison’s award-winning essay “The Empathy Exams” is a perfect example.

There is much to be gained by considering creative nonfiction as historical artifact, and students and practitioners of the genre are not surprised that creative nonfiction so easily makes its way into fields outside of literature, including history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and all the branches therein imbricated with cultural studies. Yet there is a risk in categorizing literary nonfiction as history, which is perhaps what has helped fuel recent trends that push the boundaries of nonfiction a bit harder than writers in the recent past. Essays are highly crafted art objects that belong in the realm of literature *and* history. In this light, then, it is important to consider that the analysis of historical objects requires different approaches, especially when concerning secrets.

We hope, then, that readers will like how we’re adding stylistic branches in the evolutionary tree of creative nonfiction. Essays about secrets, lies, and half-truths encourage both writers and readers to unlock the secret of the text. But why not also go to the source, and see the writers unlocking the craft of their secrets? That is why we’ve included a short interview for each selection. We’re letting the interviews, not labels, provide clarity into the levels of half-truth in these essays. Through the interviews, readers are better able to hear authorial intention. The interviews also instruct writers of all levels on how to write about their own detective work in uncovering a secret (or constructing a half-truth in order to keep one).

The consequences of revealing secrets is another problematic aspect. Amy E. Robillard’s “Changing the Subject” deftly handles parallel mother-daughter secrets. Ron Tanner’s “My Father’s Secrets” gives voice to a father whose secret he was contractually obliged not to reveal. The secret keeper is not the only person affected by the secret; families and friends and coworkers fall into the secret’s gravitational field. So where are the ethical boundaries? In “Secret Machine,” Brenda Miller limns the boundary as she stands in the studio of an artist trying to process the collapsing hours of September 11, an artist who can barely speak aloud what her work seems to make obvious to strangers. Miller decides to tell this artist’s story, and in essence tell her secret; in the interview, Miller explains the complexities of 9/11 secrets, especially when they are not yours. She is sensitive to timing: when do you say what you need to say?