

THE Fourth

Robert L. Root, Jr.
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Genre



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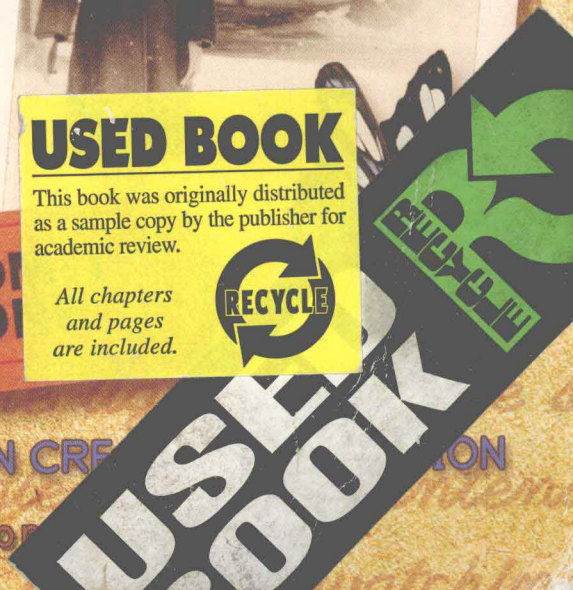


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CONTEMPORARY WRITERS OF/ON CRE

Third Edition



The Fourth Genre

Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction

THIRD EDITION

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Central Michigan University

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Michigan State University



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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 one another” (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.

—Phillip Lopate

Admirers of nailed-down definitions and tidy categories may not like to hear it, but all writers and readers are full-time imaginers, all prose is imaginative, and fiction and nonfiction are just two anarchic shades of ink swirling around the same mysterious well. Those of us who would tell a story can only dip in our pens. We can never claim full certainty as to which shade of ink we’re using.

—David James Duncan

The boundaries of creative nonfiction will always be as fluid as water.

—Mary Clearman Blew

Don’t spread it around, but it’s a sweet time to be an essayist.

—Joseph Epstein

Preface

Beginning the Conversation

Rationale and Overview

The Fourth Genre, Third Edition, is an anthology devoted to contemporary works of creative nonfiction. The readings in all three sections encompass the genre's full spectrum: personal essays and memoirs, literary journalism, and academic/cultural criticism. Creative nonfiction is the kind of literary writing that regularly appears in small magazines, reviews, and journals, such as *The Georgia Review*, *Ascent*, and *The Missouri Review*; in trade magazines, such as *Harper's*, *Orion*, and *The New Yorker*; in journals focused on creative nonfiction, such as *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *Under the Sun*; and in book-length essay and memoir collections. One of the hallmarks of this form is that the boundaries between subgenres are quite expansive. That's because its writers often braid narrative telling with fictional and poetic techniques and combine portraiture and self-reflection with reportage and critical analysis. In that regard *The Fourth Genre* highlights the elasticity and versatility of this still-evolving genre.

We also see creative nonfiction as the subject that binds together the three disparate strands in most English departments: literature, creative writing, and composition. Traditionally, the study of literature has been centered on analysis and interpretation in three genres—poetry, fiction, and drama; the study of creative writing has also focused on those genres; and composition has become the domain of nonfiction. We believe that this unnatural separation can be bridged by acknowledging creative nonfiction as the fourth genre. That is, we think of creative nonfiction simultaneously as a form of literature, as a goal of creative writing, and as the aesthetic impulse in composition.

This book then, attempts to present creative nonfiction in a framework that emphasizes its keystone status:

- It is a reader for writers of creative nonfiction, providing a range of samples of the forms and strategies practiced by many contemporary writers.

- It is an anthology for students of nonfiction literature, providing not only examples of its variety but also theoretical and critical responses to the form by critics, teachers, and the writers themselves.
- It is a collection for students of composing practices, providing reflections on the forms and strategies by the essayists, memoirists, literary journalists, cultural critics, poets, and novelists who write creative nonfiction.

These specifications make *The Fourth Genre* most suitable for courses in composition, creative writing, and genre literature. And not coincidentally, these are the courses in which we ourselves used the book in its classroom testing stages.

The fact that each of us was simultaneously asked to develop courses in creative nonfiction at different universities also says something about the emergence of the fourth genre from neglect in the past decade or so. Anthologies and collections of personal essays, nature writing, literary journalism, cultural criticism, travel writing, and memoirs have proliferated in recent years, and literary magazines have begun to include creative nonfiction and the essay among the forms they regularly publish. Workshops in creative nonfiction have also been included for strands of writer's conferences and writer's workshops, and individual conferences have been organized solely around "writing the self," "environmental writing," and "travel writing." *The Fourth Genre*, therefore, represents our attempt to compile a contemporary anthology/reader that approaches creative nonfiction from a number of perspectives, trying not to let our efforts prescribe its boundaries or place limits on its possibilities.

Creative nonfiction encompasses a variety of styles, sensibilities, and forms. Its writers share a common desire to speak in a singular voice as active participants in their own experience. This impulse often overlaps with the writer's need to mediate that experience by serving as a witness/correspondent, thus creating an unique synergy. As a result, creative nonfictionists may write to establish or define an identity, to explore and chronicle personal discoveries and changes, to examine personal conflicts, to interrogate their opinions, and to connect themselves to a larger heritage and community. Given this context, the style, focus, and structure of each work may vary. Any given piece can be lyrical, expository, meditative, informational, reflective, self-interrogative, exploratory, analytical, and/or whimsical. Moreover, a work's structure might be a traditional "linear" narrative or it may create its own disjunctive and segmented form.

To take advantage of the genre's flexibility, as well as of its emphasis on the writer's presence and voice, we have chosen readings that are representative, accessible, and challenging to students in advanced composition and creative writing workshops, as well as to students in genre-specific literature courses. We assume that student readers will be asked to write their own creative nonfiction, and that, at the same time, they will be developing a personal/critical theory that reflects the genre's possibilities.

Perhaps our most vital concern is to initiate a writer-to-reader conversation on and about creative nonfiction. Therefore, we've designed the book to be interactive by dividing it into three separate yet interconnected sections: a representative

anthology of personal essays, memoirs, works of literary journalism, and personal/cultural criticism as currently practiced by recognized and emerging writers; a gathering of essays and articles that centers on more general matters of craft, definition, and theory; and a section in which four emergent writers discuss how their accompanying works of creative nonfiction were composed.

This organization encourages student writers to learn their craft the way most successful writers have learned theirs: by reading what other writers have written, by picking up tips and ideas from writers about the way they write, and by applying specific strategies culled from the readings to their own writing.

Selections and Organization

The Fourth Genre's most distinctive features are the range and scope of the readings and the interconnectedness of the three sections. In selecting these particular works, we have tried to maintain a balance between writing that is serious and informal, rigorous and pleasurable. In all instances, our criteria was that the writings be stimulating and that they have literary worth; that they be wide ranging in subject and form, familiar at times and challenging at others; and that they be strong examples of the kind of thought-provoking and authentic writing that is being done in the genre today.

In addition, several other considerations have guided our choices, perhaps the most compelling of which was our desire to counterbalance the recent creative nonfiction anthologies and manuals that identify the genre as equivalent to literary journalism. Such books tend to place little emphasis on the personal, autobiographical, and "literary" impulses (discovery, exploration, reflection) that generate much of the writing that we would call creative nonfiction. While we think of this genre as broad and inclusive, we feel that creative nonfiction's identity is more closely connected to the spirit of Montaigne's work than it is to matters of subject, reportage, and research. That is to say, Montaigne's essays were first and foremost intimate and *personal*, and that he actively cultivated self-exploration and self-discovery. As such, his writings express the digressions, meanderings, meditations, ruminations, and speculations that characterize a singular, idiosyncratic mind at work. As Montaigne himself says, "It is myself I portray."

This point of view is not meant to duck the issue of self-examination as it extends to larger connections and broader subjects; quite the contrary. In fact, we believe along with cultural critic Mariana Torgovnick that "All writing about self and culture is personal in that writers and critics find some of their richest material in experience. . . . Often our search for personal meaning is precisely what generates our passion and curiosity for the subjects we research and write about." It is this kind of curiosity and self-exploration that marks the majority of pieces in this book—be they personal essays, memoirs, reportage, or academic criticism—or a commingling of more than one of those subgenres.

Other concerns that guided our choices were:

- to encourage aspiring writers and curious readers who come to this genre from an assortment of academic disciplines
- to spotlight representative, accessible writers from a variety of fields—literature, science, nature writing, women’s studies, journalism, rhetoric and composition, and cultural studies, among them
- to offer readings that remind us of the breadth and possibilities of this continually evolving genre

To these ends, we present the reader with a broad range of examples, as well as essays and articles by writers and teachers about the forms in which they work. Along with pieces by established writers, we’ve tried to select works that are less frequently taught and anthologized—provocative writing that we think will stimulate fresh and enthusiastic responses from students and teachers. In choosing these particular readings, we’re hoping that *The Fourth Genre* will generate numerous alternatives for using creative nonfiction in the classroom.

Part One, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, is an anthology/sampler of contemporary creative nonfiction. It is intended to showcase the variety of voices and personas, the flexibility and expansiveness, and the range of subject matter and structures that creative nonfiction is able to embrace. Part One is also a representative mix of thematic explorations, self-portraiture, investigations into subject matter and ideas, and intimate personal discoveries and disclosures. Not only do the specific subjects change as they are taken up by different writers, but the techniques each writer uses to explore his/her subject can vary widely. Some writers use straightforward narrative and reportage; others blend narrative telling with fictional techniques such as scenes, characters, and dialogue; and still others explore their subjects in more lyrical, discursive, or poetic ways.

However diverse these approaches might be, the individual pieces are marked by the distinctiveness of the author’s presence, no matter whether he or she is the center of the piece or an observer-reporter. Therefore, in all the writings in this section we witness the mind of the writer as he or she attempts to examine what Mariana Torgovnick describes as “some strongly felt experience, deeply held conviction, long-term interest, or problem that has irritated the mind.”

In Part Two, *Talking about Creative Nonfiction*, we have chosen essays by working writers and teachers who are as passionate about discussing matters of craft as they are articulate in explaining their theories about the nature of creative nonfiction. Because several of these authors have also written pieces that appear in Part One, we invite the reader to pair selections to see what kinds of strategies, theories, and perspectives the writers have developed. In addition, we also suggest that both teachers and students explore how the essays in Part One can serve as examples of the kinds of theoretical stances that the writers and teachers in Part Two advocate.

Another way to approach the writing in Part Two is to view it as a writer’s conversation about the possibilities and limits of the genre. Consider for example, the differing views on literal and invented truth in memoir as proposed by Mary

Clearman Blew, Annie Dillard, Patricia Hampl, and Mimi Schwartz; or compare Phillip Lopate's idea of the personal essay as a more "self-interrogative form" with Scott Russell Sanders's notion of the essayist as "the singular first-person"; or examine passionate yet differing approaches by Rebecca Blevins Faery and Mariana Torgovnick to using the personal voice in academic writing.

You can also use this section of the book to probe more deeply into an assortment of composing strategies—that is, the use of differing narrative stances and personas; the employment of disjunctive and segmented mosaics; and the pointedly fictional and poetical techniques that memoirists, personal essayists, literary journalists, and cultural critics adopt in their writings.

All of these perspectives, then, anchor the genre in the notions, theories, and designs of working writers, many of whom are also writing teachers. As such, they give the reader an "inside" and personal look at the various ways the genre is evolving, and at the same time they offer a broader, more inclusive view of how contemporary creative nonfiction is being written and defined.

In Part Three, Composing Creative Nonfiction, four writers add their voices to the conversation in an attempt to help the student (and teacher) bridge the gap between experienced and emergent writers. In addition to the pieces themselves, Maureen Stanton, Simone Poirier-Bures, Mary Elizabeth Pope, and Emily D. Chase discuss their composing processes, sharing decisions on the drafts and revisions that their works-in-progress have undergone. In so doing, they focus our attention on the writing process itself.

We created this section not only to give aspiring student writers an inside look at how these pieces evolved, but also to demonstrate the many possibilities that characterize this genre. We also think that student writers will benefit greatly from paying attention to the disclosures from emerging writers, especially as these writers supplement and reinforce the readings in Parts One and Two. In addition, the cross references between all three sections open up the conversation further by revealing additional aspects of its texts and authors. And finally, by pairing the emerging writers' works with their own comments about their work, we are encouraging and reinforcing the kind of dialogue established in Parts One and Two.

Essentially then, Part One is an anthology *of* creative nonfiction, Part Two is an anthology *on* creative nonfiction, and Part Three is a shorter collection *of and about* the writing of creative nonfiction.

The readings in all three sections and the book's interactive organization, therefore, express why we think that creative nonfiction is the most accessible and personal of all four literary genres, as well as why we believe the time is ripe for extending this dialogue to curious and interested students.

Apparatus

In keeping with the spirit of the genre's flexibility, we have provided a minimum of editorial apparatus. We assume that teachers will mix and match whichever readings suit their inclinations and teaching designs. And rather than impose a

thematic, historical, or subgeneric interpretation on its users, or lock the book into a pattern based on our course designs, we prefer to emphasize the genre's multiple dimensions and possibilities. Moreover, in keeping with our intent to acquaint students (and teachers) with the rich body of work that's being produced in creative nonfiction today, we've tried to make this anthology as flexible and user friendly as possible. We want to give students permission to think of themselves as apprentices/fellow writers, to urge them to experience their writing as an inside out activity, and finally to guide them in learning to read in more "writerly" ways.

That said, along with this preface we have provided some guidelines and rationales for using the book. The introduction, for example, offers an expanded discussion of why creative nonfiction is the fourth genre. It also contains a detailed explanation of what we think are the five main elements of creative nonfiction. In the section on Writers, Readers, and the Fourth Genre, we talk about the personal connections between writer and reader while offering specific examples of why we think of creative nonfiction as both a literary and transactional genre. Here we also discuss creative nonfiction as a genre that pushes at boundaries, as well as a genre whose practitioners write primarily to connect themselves in more intimate, expressive, and personal ways with their readers. In the section entitled Joining the Conversation, we expand on the notion of why we designed *The Fourth Genre* as an inclusive, ongoing conversation about the art and craft of writing creative nonfiction. Moreover, in the introductions to all three sections—Part One's anthology, Part Two's readings about the genre, and Part Three's dialogue on composing processes—we offer overviews of each section as well as suggestions for using the book interactively.

Another apparatus is contained in the book's three tables of contents—all of which suggest alternative ways to read and teach *The Fourth Genre*. The table of contents at the front of the book is organized alphabetically to give teachers and students the option of deciding what readings they will match up or pair with one another. Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction, the first alternative contents, cross-references the readings from Parts One and Three according to Forms of Creative Nonfiction, and categorizes the Part Two and Part Three readings under the heading of Processes and Criticism of Creative Nonfiction. Approaches to Writing and Discussing Creative Nonfiction, the second alternative contents, also categorizes the readings according to subgenres. Under each subgenre (memoir, personal essay, etc.) we offer readers three approaches for examining creative nonfiction: Writers on Their Work, Further Examples of the Form, and Further Discussion of the Form. All of these of course, are meant to be suggestive rather than prescriptive. We have also provided Notes on Authors as an aid to further reading.

Instructor's Manual

In addition to the guidelines within the text, we have written a comprehensive and detailed instructor's manual. It gives specific teaching suggestions and explanations for using the book in three different classroom settings. More specifically,

it offers an assortment of options for organizing the materials in composition, creative writing, and literary genre courses. In all instances we've included brief discussions of the readings as creative nonfiction, as well as suggestions for pairing or clustering selections according to subgenres, compatible themes, and issues of craft. We've also designed questions that offer different perspectives on the readings and that address matters of composing. Finally, we've provided a variety of writing prompts and suggestions for dealing with students' writing in all three classroom settings.

Acknowledgments

The paths by which the two of us have come to creative nonfiction are familiar ones to many writers and teachers. Writing has played an important role in both of our lives. It has been the subject of college courses and post-college workshops in poetry, fiction, drama, essay, environmental writing, film writing, and professional writing. It has been the preoccupation that has produced both published and unpublished work in a variety of forms—creative nonfiction, of course, but also poetry, fiction, drama, sports journalism, and radio commentary. As it does for so many other writers, the habit of writing colors the way we approach almost everything we do in life.

We also have been teachers for most of our adult lives, particularly of writing courses and courses on the teaching of composition. Happily, the center of our teaching and our scholarship alike has been the study of and immersion in the activity that energizes our nonacademic lives.

In recent years, we have initiated courses in creative nonfiction in Western Michigan University's MFA/Ph.D program, Michigan State University's American Studies graduate program, and in Central Michigan University's Composition and Communication master's program. As we designed these courses and consulted with one another, we agreed to encourage our students to write essays that covered a range of contemporary creative nonfiction and to give them a range of strategies with which to do that. Moreover, we invited them into the genre by asking them to consider not only what contemporary writers were publishing but also what those same writers themselves were saying about the kind of work they do. As an ongoing activity, we continued to share our own work-in-progress with our students and to "publish" anthologies of student writing within the classes.

And so we have come to this book attempting to center creative nonfiction, to keep ourselves centered on it as writers and teachers and students of the fourth genre, and to invite further speculation about it by readers, writers, and teachers interested in how we write, think about, and teach creative nonfiction now.

Along the way we have been aided in our growth as writers and development as teachers of creative nonfiction by an array of colleagues, students, and teachers, as well as by both our partners. In particular we should acknowledge the following:

From Michael Steinberg: The students in English 631 at Western Michigan University and Shirley Clay Scott, former English Chair at Western, who gave me the opportunity to develop the MFA/Ph.D program's first creative nonfiction workshop; the students in American Studies 891 at Michigan State University, and Peter Levine, former program director, and David Cooper, former acting director, for allowing me free rein in designing my course; Donald Murray, whose writing and teaching has inspired my own; Skip Renker, who provided valuable input and advice when I needed it; Doug Noverr, my department chair, and Pat McConeghy, associate dean of Arts and Letters, both of whom granted me release time from teaching to complete this book; Lee Hope, the director of the Stonecoast Writer's Conference, who over the course of three summers gave me the opportunity to develop a creative nonfiction workshop in conjunction with five wonderful colleagues: Phyllis Barber, David Bradley, Stephen Dunn, David Huddle, and Syd Lea. My special thanks to them for showing me how it's done. Thanks as well to Dr. Sam Plyler, who kept the faith throughout this project. And finally to Carole Berk Steinberg, my gratitude, as always, for her unconditional support and unflagging encouragement.

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Robert L. Root, Jr., and Michael Steinberg

Introduction

Creative Nonfiction, the Fourth Genre

Creative nonfiction is the fourth genre. This assumption, declared in the title of this book, needs a little explaining. Usually literature has been divided into three major genres or types: poetry, drama, and fiction. Poets, dramatists, and novelists might arrange this trio in a different order, but the idea of three literary genres has, until very recently, dominated introductory courses in literature, generic divisions in literature textbooks, and categories of literature in bookstores. Everything that couldn't be classified in one of these genres or some subgenre belonging to them (epic poetry, horror novels) was classified as "nonfiction," even though, as Jocelyn Bartkevicius points out elsewhere in this collection, they could be classified as "nonpoetry" just as well. Unfortunately, this classification system suggests that everything that is nonfiction should also be considered nonliterature, a suggestion that is, well, nonsense.

We refer to creative or literary nonfiction as the fourth genre as a way of reminding readers that literary genres are not limited to three; we certainly do not intend the term to indicate ranking of the genres but rather to indicate their equality. It would be better to have a more succinct, exclusive term for the genre. Writers have been composing literary forms of nonfiction for centuries, even if only recently have they begun to use the terms *creative nonfiction* or *literary nonfiction* to separate it from the nonliterary forms of nonfiction. And, after all, although it is creative or imaginative or literary, its being nonfiction is still what distinguishes it from the other literary genres.

The shape of creative nonfiction is, in Robert Atwan's phrase, "malleable" and, in O. B. Hardison's, "Protean." Perhaps we can picture its throbbing, pulsing, mercurial existence as locations on a series of intersecting lines connecting the poles of the personal and the public, the diary and the report, the informal and the formal, the marginalia and the academic article, the imaginative and the expository. Creative nonfiction essays would be located on these lines somewhere within the boundaries set by neighboring genres, not only "the three creative genres" of fiction, poetry, and drama but also the "expressive" genres of diary, journal, and autobiography and the "objective" genres of traditional (as opposed to literary) journalism, criticism, and polemic and technical writing. It may be fair to

say that creative nonfiction centers in the essay but continually strains against the boundaries of other genres, endeavoring to push them back and to expand its own space without altering its own identity.

The Elements of Creative Nonfiction

Yet despite all the elusiveness and malleability of the genre and the variety of its shapes, structures, and attitudes, works of creative nonfiction share a number of common elements, although they may not all be present all the time in uniform proportions. The most pronounced common elements of creative nonfiction are *personal presence, self-discovery and self-exploration, veracity, flexibility of form, and literary approaches to nonfiction*.

Personal Presence

Writers of creative nonfiction tend to make their personal presence felt in the writing. Whatever the subject matter may be—and it can be almost anything—most creative nonfiction writing, as Rosellen Brown says of the essay, “presents itself, if not as precisely true, then as an emanation of an identifiable speaking voice making statements for which it takes responsibility” (5). In such writing the reader encounters “a persona through whose unique vision experience or information will be filtered, perhaps distorted, perhaps questioned”; the writer’s voice creates an identity that “will cast a shadow as dense and ambiguous as that of an imaginary protagonist. The self is surely a created character” (5).

Throughout the various forms of creative nonfiction, whether the subject is the writer’s self (as perhaps in personal essays and memoirs) or an objective, observed reality outside the self (as perhaps in nature essays and personal cultural criticism), the reader is taken on a journey into the mind and personality of the writer. Some writers directly engage in interrogations of the self by unequivocally examining and confronting their own memories, prejudices, fears, even weaknesses. Others are more meditative and speculative, using the occasion of remembered or observed experience to connect to issues that extend beyond the self and to celebrate or question those connections. Still others establish greater distance from their subjects, taking more of an observer’s role than a participant’s role. Yet even as they stand along the sidelines we are aware of their presence, because their voice is personal, individual, not omniscient.

This sense of the author’s presence is a familiar element of essays and memoirs, of course. These center on the author’s private reflections and experiences. As essayist Phillip Lopate writes,

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a

friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship. (xxiii)

But personal presence can also pull subject-oriented writing (principally journalistic and academic writing) into the realm of creative nonfiction. Arguing a need for “writerly models for writing about culture,” Marianna Torgovnick insists, “Writing about culture is personal. Writers find their material in experience as well as books, and they leave a personal imprint on their subjects. They must feel free to explore the autobiographical motivation for their work, for often this motivation is precisely what generates writers’ interests in their topics” (3). Including this personal voice in cultural criticism surrenders some of the authority—or the pretense of authority—generally found in academic writing, but substitutes for it the authority of apparent candor or personal honesty. What Rosellen Brown writes of the personal essayist is applicable to all creative nonfiction writers: “the complex delight of the essayist’s voice is that it can admit to bewilderment without losing its authority” (7). This sense of personal presence is one of the most forceful elements of creative nonfiction.

Self-Discovery and Self-Exploration

As many writers in this book suggest—either directly or indirectly—this genre encourages self-discovery, self-exploration, and surprise. Often, the writer “is on a journey of discovery, often unasked for and unplanned,” Rosellen Brown writes. “The essayist is an explorer, whereas the fiction writer is a landed inhabitant” (7). Phillip Lopate speaks of self-discovery that takes place in essays as writing that “not only monitors the self but helps it gel. The essay is an enactment of the creation of the self” (xliv). This genre grants writers permission to explore without knowing where they will end up, to be tentative, speculative, reflective. Because writing creative nonfiction so often reveals and expresses the writer’s mind at work and play, the genre permits us to chart the more whimsical, nonrational twists and turns of our own imaginations and psyches. More frequently than not, the subject matter becomes the catalyst or trigger for some personal journey or inquiry or self-interrogation. Writers who seem most at home with this genre are those who like to delve and to inquire, to question, to explore, probe, meditate, analyze, turn things over, brood, worry—all of which creative nonfiction allows, even encourages.

Such interests may seem at first glance appropriate only to a narrow range of “confessional writing,” but in much of the best creative nonfiction, writers use self-disclosure as a way of opening their writing to a more expansive exploration. This genre, then, is a good choice for writers who like to reach for connections that extend beyond the purely personal. As W. Scott Olson writes, “As the world becomes more problematic, it is in the little excursions and small observations that we can discover ourselves, that we can make an honest connection with others, that we can remind each other of what it means to belong to one another” (viii).

Flexibility of Form

One of the most exciting elements of creative nonfiction is the way in which contemporary writers “stretch the limits of the form” and “are developing a [nonfiction] prose that lives along the borders of fiction and poetry” (Atwan x). Contemporary creative nonfiction uses the full range of style and structure available to other literary and nonliterary forms. Most often, readers have noticed the use of fictional devices in creative nonfiction, particularly in what is termed *the nonfiction novel* or in certain examples of literary journalism, which Mark Kramer has defined as “extended digressive narrative nonfiction” (21). Rosellen Brown, who refers to the personal essay as a “nonfiction narrative,” believes it is “every bit as much an imaginative construction as a short story” and that “it must use some, if not all, of the techniques of fiction: plot, characterization, physical atmosphere, thematic complexity, stylistic appropriateness, psychological open-endedness” (5).

And yet, while narrative elements may frequently play a part in creative nonfiction, the genre often works with lyrical, dramatic, meditative, expository, and argumentative elements as well. As Annie Dillard says, “The essay can do everything a poem can do, and everything a short story can do—everything but fake it” (“Introduction” xvii). It can also do everything a diary, a journal, a critical article, an editorial, a feature, and a report can do.

Moreover, perhaps more frequently than in other genres, creative nonfiction writers are likely to innovate and experiment with structure. They draw not only on narrative chronology and linear presentation but also on nonlinear, “disjunctive,” or associative strategies. They use different angles and perspectives to illuminate a point or explore an idea, drawing on visual and cinematic techniques such as collages, mosaics, montages, and jump cuts. They can leap backward and forward in time, ignoring chronology of event to emphasize nonsequential connections and parallels; they can structure the essay around rooms in a house or cards in a tarot deck; they can interrupt exposition or narrative with passages from journals and letters or scenes from home movies. Part of the excitement of the genre is its openness to creative forms as well as to creative contents, its invitation to experiment and push at boundaries between genres, and its ability to draw on an unlimited range of literary techniques.

Veracity

Because it sometimes draws on the material of autobiography, history, journalism, biology, ecology, travel writing, medicine, and any number of other subjects, creative nonfiction is reliably factual, firmly anchored in real experience, whether the author has lived it or observed and recorded it. As essayist and memoirist Annie Dillard writes, “The elements in any nonfiction should be true not only artistically—the connects must hold at base and must be veracious, for that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader” (“Introduction” xvii). Like the rest of us, the nonfiction writer, she says, “thinks

about actual things. He can make sense of them analytically or artistically. In either case he renders the real world coherent and meaningful, even if only bits of it, and even if that coherence and meaning reside only inside small texts" (xvii). For critic Barbara Lounsbery, who is principally speaking of literary journalism, factuality is central, by which she means: "Documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to 'invented' from the writer's mind"; she adds that "anything in the natural world is game for the nonfiction artist's attention" (xiii).

But factuality or veracity is a trickier element than it seems. As David James Duncan observes,

We see into our memories in much the way that we see across the floor of a sunbaked desert: everything we conjure, every object, creature, or event we perceive in there, is distorted, before it reaches us, by mirages created by subjectivity, time, and distance. . . . The best that a would-be nonfiction writer can do is use imperfect language to invoke imperfectly remembered events based on imperfect perceptions. (55)

Artistry needs some latitude; self-disclosure may be too risky to be total, particularly when it involves disclosure of others. Just as Thoreau compressed two years at Walden Pond into one to get the focus he needed for his great book, creative nonfiction writers sometimes alter the accuracy of events in order to achieve the accuracy of interpretation. Some of this is inadvertent—the great challenge of memoir writing is knowing how much we remember is reliable and accepting the likelihood that we are "inventing the truth." "You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts," Annie Dillard writes in "To Fashion a Text." "The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them" (70). Memories blur over time and edit themselves into different forms that others who had the same experience might not recognize. Finding the language to describe experience sometimes alters it, and your description of the experience becomes the memory, the way a photograph does. At the least we may feel a need to omit the irrelevant detail or protect the privacy of others not as committed to our self-disclosure as we are. The truth may not necessarily be veracious enough to take into court or into a laboratory; it need only be veracious enough to satisfy the writer's purpose and the art of the writing.

Literary Approaches to Nonfiction

The language of creative nonfiction is as literary, as imaginative, as that of other literary genres and is similarly used for lyrical, narrative, and dramatic effects. What separates creative nonfiction from "noncreative nonfiction" (if we can be forgiven the use of that term for a moment to categorize all nonfiction outside this genre) is not only "the unique and subjective focus, concept, context and point of view in which the information is presented and defined" (Gutkind v-vi) but also the ways in which language serves the subject. This is partly what Chris