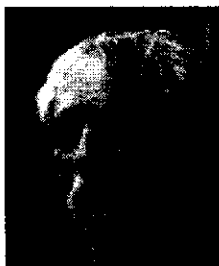


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The Creative Nonfiction Police by Lee Gutkind

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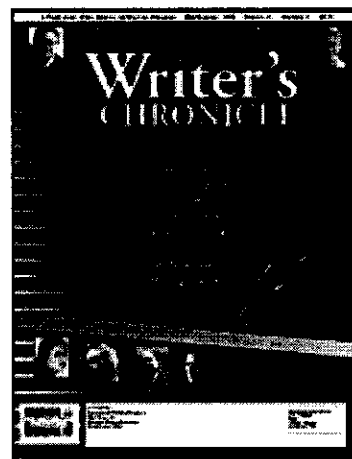
I am giving a reading at St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas. It is a Thursday evening after a day of meeting classes and answering questions about essay writing, but now, in the auditorium, the audience is sparse, perhaps 60 or so in a space that seats nearly 250. My host is embarrassed; she informs me that a popular Latino poet is reading on campus at the same time, so the potential audience is divided. I have a feeling that I am the lesser of the two. This is a city with a high percentage of Mexican-American residents. And poetry is written to be read aloud, unlike nonfiction, which is factual and informative and which, students might assume, can be tedious and boring.

Of course, I am a *creative* nonfiction writer, "creative" being indicative of the style in which the nonfiction is written so as to make it more dramatic and compelling. We embrace many of the techniques of the fiction writer, including dialogue, description, plot, intimacy of detail, characterization, point of view; except, because it is nonfiction—and this is the difference—it is true.

Writing nonfiction so that it reads like fiction is challenging and, some critics say, virtually impossible unless the author takes liberties in style and content, which may corrupt the nonfiction—making it untrue, or partially true, or shading the meaning and misleading readers. A comment from John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is frequently cited as indicative of the danger inherent in the form. Berendt made up transitions in order to move from scene to scene in his book. Creative nonfiction writers aren't supposed to make up anything in the scenes or between the scenes, including transitions, but Berendt said he was making the experience easier for himself and more enjoyable for his readers, a process he called, "rounding the corners."

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This then is the subject we are discussing in the auditorium after my reading—what writers can do or can't do in walking that thin blurred line between fiction and nonfiction. After all, if you are encouraged to use "literary techniques," straying from the literal truth for the sake of the narrative can be easy. The questions pile up, one after another; the audience is engaged. "How can you be certain that the dialogue you are recreating from an incident that occurred months ago is accurate?" asks one audience member. Another demands, "How can you look through the eyes of your characters if you are not inside their heads?"

I am answering as best I can, but as I try repeatedly to explain, such questions have a lot to do with the believability of your narrative and a writer's ethical and moral boundaries. After a while, I throw up my hands and say, "Listen! I am not the creative nonfiction police."

There is a woman in the audience—someone I had noticed earlier during my reading. She is in the front row—hard to miss—older than most of the undergraduates, blonde, attractive, in her late 30s maybe. She has the alert yet composed look of a nurse, a person only semi-relaxed, always ready to act or react. She has taken her shoes off and propped her feet on the stage; I remember how her toes wiggled as she laughed at the essay I had been reading. But when I say, "I am not the creative nonfiction police," although many people chuckle, this woman suddenly jumps to her feet, whips out a badge, and points in my direction. "Well I am," she announces. "Someone has to be. And you are under arrest." Then she scoops up her shoes and storms barefooted from the room. The Q and A ends and I rush into the hallway, but she is gone. My host says the woman is a stranger. No one knows her. She is a mystery to everyone, especially me.

The bigger mystery, however, then and now, is the set of parameters that govern or define creative nonfiction—the concepts writers must consider while laboring in or struggling with what we call the literature of reality, beginning with the difference between fiction and nonfiction, which is truth, or at least a measure of truth, because most fiction, on some level, is true. But how is the truth in nonfiction determined? Who is the final arbiter of truth? The line between fiction and nonfiction is often debated, but is there a single dividing point or an all-encompassing truth to tell?

Historians and journalists rely on sources—documents and interviews—but how do they know if the documents are accurate or the witnesses' perceptions valid? Witnesses in court will usually tell what they see as the truth—but how many innocent people have been convicted based on testimony of a sincere and objective bystander? In *All the Presidents Men*, Woodward and Bernstein insisted on the corroboration of two sources, but who is to say two sources are enough? A good historian exhausts the available sources, but sooner or later has to make decisions about which to accept and reject.

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And why, I wonder, are we always questioning the ethics of nonfiction writers? Are there no ethical boundaries in poetry and fiction? Are we more deceived by Truman Capote, who did not take notes and relied on memory to retell the horrible story of the murder of the Clutter family in *In Cold Blood*, or Michael Chabon who disguised real characters and situations in his novel, *Wonder Boys*? Many writers in Pittsburgh knew the story as intimately as Chabon, but considered it improper and potentially hurtful to the characters and their families to write about it. David Leavitt's career was significantly damaged when, in his novel, *While England Sleeps*, he described the esteemed poet Sir Stephen Spender, masked by another name and body, in a way

that endangered his reputation. Spender triggered litigation to halt the distribution of Leavitt's book. The ethical boundaries of the narrative are not, however, a new dilemma or debate. Henry David Thoreau lived for two years on Walden Pond while documenting only one year. Which part of the two years did he choose and how often, in his painstaking process of revision, did he combine two or three days—or even four weeks—into one?

This technique that Thoreau evidently employed, by the way, is called "compression"—meaning that multiple incidents or situations are combined or compressed in order to flesh out the narrative, allowing a writer to build a more compelling, fully executed three dimensional story.

In her book about Geoffrey Masson, *In the Freud Archives*, Janet Malcom combined a series of conversations about the same subject or incident into one. Malcolm did not admit to altering facts of the conversations—only when and how the conversations occurred. Does this violate some sort of ethical or moral bond with the reader or the subject? Probably not, as long as the information is not manufactured—which is the reason that Masson's suit against *The New Yorker* and Malcolm went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Masson was initially contending that Malcolm manufactured quotes; he may not have been aware of the use of compression or would not have been disturbed by it had his attorneys not questioned the technique while investigating information subpoenaed from Malcolm.

Another Janet—Janet Cooke, formerly a reporter for *The Washington Post*—was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her depiction of an eight year-old boy dealing drugs on the streets of the nation's capital. But curious reporters searching for the subject of the story eventually forced Cooke to admit that he didn't exist. He was a composite of a number of kids she had met. Cooke lost her job—her reputation was ruined. Unfortunately, others have not learned from her mistakes.

In the past couple of years, a number of journalists have been discovered and disgraced for fudging the truth. In 1997, Stephen Glass admitted to fabricating parts of 27 articles for *The New Republic*, *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, admitted to fabricating the people and the quotations in four of her columns in 1999. In one case she made up an entire story about a woman dying of cancer.

Ironically, the journalistic community has been unceasingly critical of creative nonfiction while virtually ignoring its own misdeeds. In a 1997 feature in *Vanity Fair Magazine*, "Me, Myself and I," James 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 their work. Wolcott zeroed in on the memoir and made it seem as if that was the creative nonfiction genre in its totality, while ignoring the significant information-oriented work done by John McPhee, Annie Dillard, Tracy Kidder, Gay Talese, and many others.

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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, wrote books about creative nonfiction, published a journal (*Creative Nonfiction*), directed a creative nonfiction writers' conference, and taught creative nonfiction. He called me a "human octopus."

Wolcott's observation that memoirists are overly self-obsessed was not new or particularly enlightening. This criticism has been pouring forth from dozens of directions since publication of *The Kiss*, in which Kathryn Harrison relates the details of her affair with the Presbyterian minister who is her father. Many people objected to this book because they found the subject morally indefensible—a separate or moot point. Or because they simply didn't want to know all the sordid details of the relationship; this was something personal and private—something that ought to have been fictionalized. Which it was in two of Harrison's novels, neither of which readers paid any attention to. So Harrison tried the same story in nonfiction—and achieved fame and, perhaps, fortune.

I don't find *The Kiss* particularly skillful or memorable, but I don't object to the story. My major problems concern the innocent victims of Harrison's quest to unload her anxieties. While I don't justify her father's actions, I wonder about the toll this will take on her children when they are old enough to read the book or when the parents of their classmates discuss Harrison in front of their children—an incident that could lead to embarrassment and continued distress. And what of her father's new family, his wife and children—and his congregation? Is he to be punished without being permitted to defend or explain himself?

The Perfect Storm, although not a memoir, is another popular book whose author Sebastian Junger has been accused of victimizing characters. Ray Leonard, a retired forest service ecologist, is depicted as curled on his bunk, "sullen and silent, sneaking gulps off a whiskey bottle" while his sailboat, *The Satori*, is sinking. The incident was never verified and, in fact, *The Satori* was found on a beach, intact, a few days later. It never went down. It is hard to know whether Leonard was a coward—but he is presented as one. Junger never contacted Leonard because the rest of his story and the fate of *The Satori* was irrelevant to the narrative, he said.

The Kiss and *The Perfect Storm* are troubling examples of how an author's need to write the perfect narrative or to share the pain and anxiety of a traumatic life can create innocent victims who may or may not be guilty of corruption, brutality, indecency, cowardice, or responsibility, but who will hardly ever have the opportunity to have their day in court. I understand that writing from memory is often unverifiable, but I believe that memoirists don't go far enough to confront and try to satisfy their own moral and ethical landscape.

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I said at the beginning that I wasn't the creative nonfiction police or the literary judiciary. But I am "the godfather behind creative nonfiction," after all, according to *Vanity Fair*. The real point is that I have been doing this for a long time—more than a dozen published books and 25 years of teaching; I may be the first person to teach creative nonfiction on a full-time basis—anywhere. So I would like to recommend a code for creative nonfiction writers—kind of a checklist. The word "che-cklist" is carefully chosen. There are no rules, laws, specific prescriptions relating to what to do and not to do as a creative nonfiction writer. The go-spel according to Lee Gutkind or anyone else doesn't and shouldn't exist. It's more a question of doing the right thing, being fair, following the golden rule. Treating others with courtesy and respect and using common sense.

First, strive for the truth. Be certain that everything you write is as accurate and honest as you can make it. I don't mean that everyone who has shared the experience you are writing about should agree that your account is true. As I said, everyone has his or her own very precious, private, and shifting truth. But be certain

your narrative is as true to your memory as possible.

Second, recognize the important distinction between recollected conversation and fabricated dialogue. Don't make anything up and don't tell your readers what you think your characters are thinking during the time about which you are writing. If you want to know how or what people are or were thinking, then ask them. Don't assume or guess.

Third, don't round corners—or compress situations or characters—unnecessarily. Not that rounding corners or compressing characters or incidents are absolutely wrong, but if you do experiment with these techniques, make certain you have a good reason. Making literary decisions based on good narrative principles is often legitimate—you are, after all, writers. But stop to consider the people about whom you are writing. Unleash your venom on the guilty parties; punish them as they deserve. But also ask yourself: who are the innocent victims? How have I protected them? Adults can file suits against you, but are you violating the privacy or endangering the emotional stability of children? Are you being fair to the aged or infirm?

Fourth, one way to protect the characters in your book, article, or essay is to allow them to defend themselves—or at least to read what you have written about them. Few writers do this because they are afraid of litigation or ashamed or embarrassed about the intimacies they have revealed. But sharing your narrative with the people about whom you are writing doesn't mean that you have to change what you say about them; rather, it only means that you are being responsible to your characters and the stories that you are revealing. I understand why you would not want to share your narrative; it could be dangerous. It could ruin your friendship, your marriage, your future. But by the same token so too could the publication of your book. And this is the kind of responsible action you might appreciate if the shoe were on the other foot.

I have on occasion shared parts of books with characters I have written about—with positive results. First, my characters corrected my mistakes. But, more importantly, when you come face to face with a character, you are able to communicate on a different and deeper level. When you show them what you think, they think and feel—when they read what you have written—they may get angry—an action in itself which is interesting to observe and write about.

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Or they may feel obliged to provide their side of their of the situation—a side that you have been hesitant to listen to or interpret. With the text in the middle, as a filter, it is possible to discuss personal history as a story somewhat disconnected from the reality you are experiencing. It provides a way to communicate as an exercise in writing—it filters and distances the debate. Moreover, it defines and cements your own character. The people about whom you have written may not like what you have said—and may in fact despise you for saying it—but they can only respect and admire the forthright way in which you have approached them. No laws govern the scope of good taste and personal integrity.

More than in any other literary genre, the creative nonfiction writer must rely on his or her own conscience and sensitivity to others and display a higher morality and a healthy respect for fairness and justice. We all harbor resentments, hatreds, and prejudices, but that doesn't necessarily mean, because we are writers, that we are being given special dispensation to behave in a way that is unbecoming to ourselves

and hurtful to others. This sounds so simple—yet it is so difficult. The moral and ethical responsibility of the creative nonfiction writer is to practice the golden rule and to be as fair and truthful as possible—to write both for art's sake and for humanity's sake. In other words, we police ourselves.

By saying this, I do not feel that I am being overly simplistic. As writers we intend to make a difference, to affect someone's life over and above our own. To say something that matters—this is why we write. To impact upon society, to put a personal stamp on history. Remember that art and literature are our legacies to other generations. We will be forgotten, but our books and essays, our stories and poems will always, somewhere, have a life.

Wherever you draw the line between fiction and nonfiction remember the basic rules of good citizenship: Do not recreate incidents and characters who never existed; do not write to do harm to innocent victims; do not forget your own story, but while considering your struggle and the heights of your achievements, think repeatedly about how your story will impact on and relate to your reader. Over and above the creation of a seamless narrative, you are seeking to touch and affect someone else's life—which is the goal creative nonfiction writers share with novelists and poets. We all want to connect with another human being—as many people as possible—in such a way that they will remember us and share our legacy with others.

Someday, I hope to connect with the woman with the badge and the bare feet face-to-face. The truth is, I have never forgotten her. She has, in some strange way, become an accouterment to my conscience, standing over me as I write, forcing me to ask the questions about my work that I have recommended to you. Perhaps she is here today, as I am proofreading this essay—somewhere. But from this point on I am hoping you too will feel her shadow over your shoulders each time you sit down, address your keyboard, and begin to write.

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