

## ***What Happened to Creative Nonfiction?***

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Creative nonfiction writers have produced some of the most influential articles of our time. From heart-breaking memoirs to incredibly perceptive profiles, readers are consistently presented with a unique outlook on the world, a creative delivery of everyday facts. Writers of the genre observe and convey real life, with implications that stretch from reminding people of what a massive world we inhabit to using words that offer consolation and remind someone that come what may they aren't alone. Not only does it present something special for the reader, it also allows the writer to become immersed in their project, to learn or understand something about themselves and all of humanity. When accomplished, creative nonfiction works are challenging but truly rewarding and simultaneously provide an escape and a reality-check for writers and readers alike. But through the passing of time, creative nonfiction changes and develops. There are now numerous accounts of writers publishing lies and deceiving their readers, sullyng the good name of the genre—as well as readers feeling that the nonfiction piece they just read may actually be false. What happened to Creative Nonfiction? Can it be fixed? Can it be restored as a dignified genre?

There is no definitive place or time known for the beginning of creative nonfiction. However, Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* presents a strong base to start from, one that is visible in other author's works throughout the progress and different movements of the genre leading up to today. *A Moveable Feast* is a set of memoirs, documenting Hemingway's time spent abroad in Paris. Edited by his fourth wife, the posthumously published collection is considered a fiction novel. In the preface of the book, Hemingway explains that though written according to fact, some things are left out or forgotten and informs the reader that it may be read as fiction:

If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact. (ix)

Despite this note, the book is commonly thought of as a memoir. Some critics believe that Hemingway's unedited accounts of his acquaintances in Paris—writers like Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald, both American writers and members of the “Lost Generation” of artists—are less than generous. So, it is prudent to continue publishing the book as fiction. Nonfiction published under the fiction genre is reasonably less controversial than the opposite: a fabricated story published under the pretence of fact.

A new edition of *A Moveable Feast* is currently going through publication. With changes made by one of Hemingway's grandsons, this new edition is said to be a closer

version of what Hemingway tried to achieve—an extremely thin argument because no one but Hemingway himself could say what he wanted to accomplish. Any version published is therefore no more accurate than its predecessor, making it unable to ever carry the label of nonfiction. And still, it is an inspiration to creative nonfiction writers like Lee Gutkind (proclaimed Godfather of the genre and editor of the *Creative Nonfiction Journal*) who, on his personal website, claims all of Hemingway’s works are inspirations.

Gutkind also gives enormous credit to writer Gay Talese, who is frequently referred to as one of the fathers of New Journalism (a genre that developed in the 1960’s and 70’s from the inspirations of writers like Talese and Hemingway.) However, Talese began practicing what he calls “the art of hanging around” long before New Journalism emerged as a popular genre. Talese actually rejects the term “New Journalism” believing that it suggests a “sloppiness with the facts” while Talese, who began his writing career as a newspaper reporter is more concerned with being accurate than writing the best story. In the introduction to his book, *Fame and Obscurity*, Gay Talese describes the New Journalism: “Though often reading like fiction, it is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form.”

In his most famous profile, published in April of 1966 in *Esquire* magazine under the title “Frank Sinatra has a Cold,” Talese delivers an incredibly insightful portrait of a man he never gets to interview. Instead, he develops his profile of the aging crooner by hanging around and observing him, documenting his interactions and getting stories and interviews with the people closest to him. Talese is so sure of his accuracy in everything he writes that it is hard to distrust him, but how much freedom should creative nonfiction writers ultimately have over their work?

The significance of “New Journalism” is that it marked a major change in the genre after Hemingway. It not only attracted nonfiction writers looking to add novel devices to their work, but also conventionally fiction writers who wanted to explore in the realms of fact. Whether or not Talese remains accurate in his own work, he is nonetheless correct in saying that New Journalists are a little loose with the facts. Tom Wolfe, one of the founders of the new journalism movement, achieved this style by procrastinating on an expected article. Finding himself under pressure to meet a deadline, he turned in an article completely focusing on his own opinion about the subject at hand—completely ignoring the conventional reportorial rules (“Tom Wolfe”).

As journalistic tendencies decreased, story-telling techniques such as compression and composite characters became more widely used; creating greater cause for critics of the genre to begin scrutinizing the works of creative nonfiction writers. Compression is the act of combing several scenes or interviews into one. It is helpful in nonfiction because it allows writers to manipulate what fiction writers have complete control over. Make-believe is much more flexible than fact. Composite characters solve a similar problem, but with people instead of scenes. Of course, both of these techniques are considered unethical in nonfiction work and naturally are not so controversial when used in fiction, but both prove very useful as solutions to some of the problems creative nonfiction writers face—such as word limits and the importance of the arc of the story. Even Gay Talese admits to necessarily rewording quotes and writing about other people’s

thoughts, while still able to claim that he is never challenged over false reporting. Though considering the thin between lies and artistic license, how accurate can Creative Nonfiction ever really be?

In an interview with WordPirates, managing editor of the Creative Nonfiction journal, Hattie Fletcher admits the somewhat obvious—that creative nonfiction writers sometimes face unavoidable issues. Writers can find some guidance for dealing with any problems they may face, but there can be no set of rules because, according to Fletcher, “at the end of the day, every writer has to do his or her own grappling.” In the same interview with Word Pirates, in regards to the difference between artistic license and deception, she states:

I think artistic license can extend pretty far, but transparency is key. There’s a different contract with the reader in nonfiction—namely, that the things you’re writing about really happened, and that the characters really exist, etc.—and when that turns out not to be the case, readers feel deceived. When you look at the scandals that bring this question up, it’s almost always the case that the writers didn’t let readers in on the decisions they made, to use composite characters or compression or whatever. An author’s note can go a long way.

Author’s notes, like the one from Hemingway in the preface of *A Moveable Feast*, make a trustworthy connection between reader and writer. With that simple author’s note, writers save themselves from accusation of deceit and assure readers that they are getting the closest version to fact as possible. So, a creative nonfiction piece may use some questionable techniques, but it can stay nonfiction so long as the writer-reader bond remains intact.

On his website, Lee Gutkind elaborates on the role of the writer in his explanation of creative nonfiction:

Although it sounds a bit affected and presumptuous, “creative nonfiction” precisely describes what the form is all about. The word “creative” refers simply to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid manner. To put it another way, creative nonfiction writers do not make things up; they make ideas and information that already exist more interesting and, often, more accessible.

In several of his works, he mentions the “Creative Nonfiction Police,” noting that there are no “police” to control authors and their ideas, but that instead there is a recommended code for writers—a kind of checklist. First on the list is the should-be simple task of striving for truth. Second, is acknowledging the difference between recalled conversations and made-up dialogue. The third is avoiding the unnecessary use of compression, composite characters, etc. And the last is to give the characters in the work a chance to stand up for themselves. This may be a difficult task, but in the end it assures the characters and the readers and it protects the author from public humiliation (Nguyen 352-354). Unfortunately, not all writers follow this checklist, making it more difficult to revive the once good name of Creative Nonfiction.

Recently, some very serious scandals surfaced in the media, the most commonly heard of being the James Frey controversy. Frey published his memoir *A Million Little Pieces* claiming it to be factually accurate. Oprah picked it for her book club and it topped the New York Times best-seller’s list for 15 weeks. These statistics are hardly

relevant, except to push the point that this man made a lot of money and gained a lot of publicity all based off of a lie. Money is a strong instigator of poor ethics in creative nonfiction. However, the uncovering of his lies ultimately led to the destruction of Frey's public image. Frey confessed to strongly exaggerating some parts of the book and completely fabricating others. The book no longer holds its Oprah Book Club title, the talk-show host publicly confronted Frey on her show, and his name is now synonymous with unethical practices in creative nonfiction.

Frey is publishing his newest book, *Bright Shiny Morning*, as fiction, even though he claims that most of it is factually accurate. Publishing as fiction allows him to maintain control over his story. Frey says that publishing it as fiction was partly in response to the controversy of *A Million Little Pieces* but adds, "It was also just to make the book the best book I could write, you know? If it's fiction there are no rules. I can write what I want, how I want. And sometimes altering facts or inventing facts in a work of fiction makes the book do certain things. You know—sometimes to be funny, sometimes to be sad, sometimes to try to make a point. So I felt that I had the freedom to do it this time" (Interview).

Returning to the controversy surrounding *A Million Little Pieces*, it is crucial here to note that many people believe it is the fault of the editor for not fact-checking before publication. Frey's editor was Nan Talese, the wife of Gay Talese, who according to her husband really believed in what Frey wrote. It is beneficial to fact-check the story before publication—but in her defense, fact checking is quickly becoming a dying art and there is hard evidence that even the best fact checking is vulnerable to liars.

That evidence is found in the form of Stephen Glass, an ex-reporter for *The New Republic*. In his time at *The New Republic*, he wrote 41 stories, more than half of which are partly or completely fabricated. Glass succeeded several times in covering his tracks and fooling the fact-checkers at the magazine. The publication of one article cost him his job in 1998. "Hack Heaven" is about a 15-year old hacker who breaks through the online security system of Jukt Micronics, a software firm created by Glass for the purpose of his story. When writer Adam Penenberg from *Forbes* magazine decided to do his own checking of Glass's article, he discovered what other's had missed—that Glass lied. Penenberg presented his accusations along with proof to Glass's boss, Charles Lane, who then took responsibility to continue what Penenberg started. With this particular article, in order to get past the fact-checkers, Glass invented everything from a fake website for Jukt Micronics, to fake notes from a fictitious conference, a fake voicemail that actually led to his brother's phone, and several editions of a fake hacker newsletter. Fact-checkers are sieves that catch what the writer missed—unfortunately the checkers at some places are deficient, some places don't have enough checkers and others don't have any, making it easy for lies to seep into the mainstream media. As with the Frey controversy, the discovery of his lies destroyed Glass's public image. A movie about his story, *Shattered Glass*, opened in 2003, and since then Glass wrote his own version of the story, which he published as fiction ("Stephen Glass").

In the cases of James Frey and Stephen Glass, both eventually admitted to their lies. But, there are times when confronting an author with suspicions of deceit may cross a line. There are two recent memoirs that pose such a dilemma—*The Girl with the Apple*, a romanticized version of one couple's love story, and *The Kiss*, an extremely controversial memoir about an incestuous affair between a father and daughter.

The first story was denied publication as a memoir, after it was discovered that the first meeting of Herman and Roma Rosenblat was not factually accurate. Herman's version, that he continues to support, is that he and his wife met during the holocaust. She tossed apples over the fence into the concentration camp where he was being held. Years later they met on a blind date, and soon after were married. The real version is not completely different, but young Roma never threw apples over the fence to Herman—they had only been in similar situations and found each other years later on a blind date, bonding over their mutual horrifying experience. Herman defends himself by claiming that his version of the story is how he always pictured it, and that he was trying to “bring happiness to people.” It's difficult to prove that a memory is false, but ultimately, Herman should have considered using that author's note. Without it, Rosenblat is added to the “swelling ranks of discredited memoirists” and the middle of all of the controversy surrounding moral and ethics in nonfiction—the same controversy that is sullyng the good name of creative nonfiction and shaming writers who practice it. The Rosenblat's story was eventually published in the form of a fiction novel (“Herman Rosenblat...hoax”).

The second story, by Kathryn Harrison, really stretches the limits of creative nonfiction. Not only does it cover her perverted relationship with her father, it also discusses the problems between her and her mother—which she uses as a shield, protecting herself from blame. The novel caused critics to accuse Harrison of sensationalism and to condemn her supposed desire to make money by writing about such a forbidden topic. Still being published as a memoir, *The Kiss* is difficult to classify and difficult to refute. Harrison's inappropriate relationship with her father is very personal and creates around her a protective sensitivity barrier. The story, which she unsuccessfully published several times as fiction, remains a mystery because of this barrier. Everyone questions the accuracy of the memoir, but no one is willing to dig deeper into such a touchy subject. It should not be so difficult to invest trust in an author, but becomes increasingly difficult due to more media coverage about unethical creative nonfiction writers.

So, what happened to creative nonfiction? The 1990's produced a lot of memoirs and almost saw the end of morality within the genre. It seems to get more and more difficult to find writers who are more concerned with accuracy than making a mint off of a romanticized story. However, there is still hope that the genre will survive. Creative nonfiction is still very young, and as with all things we must learn to accept its unavoidable imperfections, things like the use of compression and the unfortunate presence of unethical authors. There will always be a critic trying to call out the next liar, as there should be, but writers now need to prove the critics wrong—prove they can be held to high standards of writing.

Can we fix it? Creative nonfiction is always in the hands of the writer, it is their story, their work—but they need to remember authors like Hemingway, who protected his work by simply letting go of the nonfiction label and Talese, who did what was necessary for his work without sacrificing the facts. Both writers and their works are still respected today, and any accusations that arise are successfully refuted. Writers of today must also follow the code laid forth by our godfather Lee Gutkind. As a creative nonfiction writer, reporting fact is the priority. There are precautions worth taking, like collecting several accounts of a story to assure the ultimate in factual reporting or sending

the finished work to anyone involved to allow them the chance of refuting anything before publication—which also protects the writer from public accusations that ruin reputations. Writers have the privilege adding an author’s note if any doubt surrounds a work, to maintain a strong bond between reader and writer, but it should not be used lightly. If too much doubt surrounds a work, the smartest decision is leaving behind the nonfiction classification and publishing as fiction. These small steps may seem trivial or unnecessary—and some may even see them as an annoyance or impediment coming between an author and the perfect story—but precision, honesty, and accuracy can help save the genre that has been pushed to the edge countless times.

Can it be restored as a dignified genre? Creative nonfiction can become a respected genre, escape the constantly shining spotlight of controversy, and regain the dignity it achieved more than 30 years ago. The information presented here and more proves that we are moving into a brand new journalism, a further extension in creative nonfiction—one that hopefully will bring back the dignity to the genre. Creative nonfiction is no longer the art of writing fact; it is the endeavor to write factually accurate information in an artistic and creative way. Though still an art form, it is the effort of writing accurately that will protect the authors who achieve it, also possibly leading to the undermining of those who unfortunately fail. From Hemingway to Talese to James Frey, creative nonfiction never stops changing—no one can say where it will go in the future, and that’s ok—we’ll get there eventually. Today, we can only put forth our best effort and by using our new definition, we’ll hopefully reverse the criticisms and save creative nonfiction.

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