

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is divided into two parts. Part I defines creative nonfiction, tells you how and when creative nonfiction evolved, who the prime movers are, what the primary challenges are, and why creative nonfiction has become so popular and important in the literary, scholarly, journalistic, and publishing worlds.

I've titled Part I "What Is Creative Nonfiction?" If there were a subtitle, it would read: "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know, Everything That Is Important to Know, and Everything I Can Think of Related to Creative Nonfiction to Tell You, Except—How to Write It."

Writing is an integral aspect of every page in Part I, which provides the parameters that will guide you as you conceive of your creative nonfiction writing product, whether it be essay, article, memoir, or book. Part I will help you as you choose a subject to write about, decide how and why you will or will not be a character in it, how you will research it, flesh it out for the first time on paper or computer display, fact-check it, edit it, polish it, pray for it—and continuously revise it.

All the rules of the game are here for you to contemplate so that you are well aware of the legal, ethical, and moral lines between factual creativity and over-the-line fabrication. All of this, including the writing process itself, will be discussed in detail, along with the passion, the spirituality, the painful frustrations, and the irreplaceable rewards of the creative nonfiction way of writing and living.

Which brings us to Part II. It guides and encourages you as you put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard and experience the magic moment of creation.

Composers are informed and motivated by music, artists by the work of the masters, Da Vinci, Van Gogh, Picasso. They may have been painting or composing before actually becoming grounded in their artistry, but they did not do their best work, were not recognized, and did not achieve greatness or professional credibility until they were thoroughly steeped in the background of their profession. So too with the art of creative nonfiction as delineated in Part I, which prepares you for Part II.

In Part II, you'll incorporate the insight and knowledge you gained in Part I, and as the classic Nike advertising campaign challenged consumers: Just Do It!

"Doing it" means "writing—rewriting—revising" and then, when you're finished—doing it again: turning your life or the lives of the people about whom you are writing into hard-hitting, compelling, informative, truthful, and accurate drama with vivid scenes, electrifying characters, and unforgettable messages.

On the last page of this book (but before the appendix), you can read my final message to you, specifying how you will achieve such a standard of excellence: write, revise, and rewrite until you are certain that you can't go any farther, that you have achieved your best work. And then writing, revising, and rewriting again. Start something new but hold on to what you have just written for a while longer so that you can revisit each draft with perspective.

My goal in Part II is to teach you, inspire you, give you the confidence to write with courage and conviction and to nurture your work until it can stand as a testament to your persistence, your talent, and the inherent power of your story.

Because both parts of this book are essential, it hardly matters which you read first. Read spontaneously where the muse strikes your fancy—from beginning to end, from back to front—or start with some of the readings scattered throughout the text. After all, this is the way we write. We move in and out of the stories we tell, capturing the reader with the power of our words and the intensity and scope of our vision.

And speaking of reading, there are lots of great essays and excerpts in this book by new and established writers. Some of the work is mine, but mostly it's from other writers like Gay Talese, Rebecca Skloot, Lauren Slater. I will ask you to read this work (and learn to read all creative writing)

with a “double eye”—learn to read from the point of view of the reader, your reader. It’s a kind of golden rule: writing for others in a way you might want others to write for you. That’s one eye. The other eye is teaching yourself to read like a writer, to understand the approach, the craft, the tricks of the trade of the writer you are reading. I will deconstruct some of the

EXERCISE 1

No matter how old you are—eighteen or eighty—there have been significant moments in your life that represent something you have learned. It could be the scene at the dinner table when your parents announced to the family that they were divorcing—or the day you turned forty and felt old, or the moment you crossed the finish line of the Marine Corps Marathon, when you were fifty, and felt young.

In Part II, I devote a lot of time and attention to the elements and techniques that the writer needs to use when writing scenes. But for now, let me say that scene writing is true storytelling. A scene is an incident, an experience, a happening that the writer captures as cinematically as possible.

The experience—or the scene you are recreating—could actually come from someone you are writing about. A story you heard or an incident you observed. If you’re writing memoir, the event probably happened to you. And this is what we will focus on for now—you!

Begin to jot down experiences that you vividly remember. Sketch them out, reconstruct them in your own mind, and write them. What do they mean to you—or what might they mean to your readers? How might descriptions of those experiences help others? Go to work on that assignment, for you will revisit and expand it throughout the book.

Meanwhile, in Part I (page 3), I will recreate for you something that happened to me—the day, the moment, I became the Godfather. Life changed for me in the blink of an eye and provided me with an opportunity to spread the word about nonfiction storytelling, the literature of reality, and in the process, help readers and writers discover and develop a new avenue of expression.

readings in this book, and then I will ask you to deconstruct some of the other readings on your own—with my help, of course.

So jump into this book wherever you choose. Learn what you need to know about creative nonfiction in any order—and begin to fulfill your mission as a writer, to tell your story, share your knowledge and wisdom, make an impact, and influence opinions and change lives.

By the way, in addition to readings, there will be periodic question and answer boxes. I do this once in a while because I am trying to relate to my readers and to anticipate your thoughts and questions while you are reading. It is also always good for a writer to change the pace of the book once in a while; it helps both the reader and the writer to focus and refocus, to think and review. This is part and parcel of what we want to do as creative nonfiction writers—to make our readers think more deeply about the stories we are telling and to make ourselves delve more deeply into the inherent meaning and clarity of our message. Capturing a story and connecting the story with our readers is what we are trying to do.

And please take note of the repetition of the word “story” and the idea of storytelling. As you will discover, many parts of this book are written in the creative nonfiction style, which is anchored in story, to demonstrate the genre it portrays. This is what creative nonfiction is all about—the basic, anchoring elements, whether it is personal essay, intense immersion, lyric essay, memoir, whatever subcategory you may want to label it. In the end, creative nonfiction means true stories, well told. That is what I intend to do—and exactly what I intend to help motivate you to do.

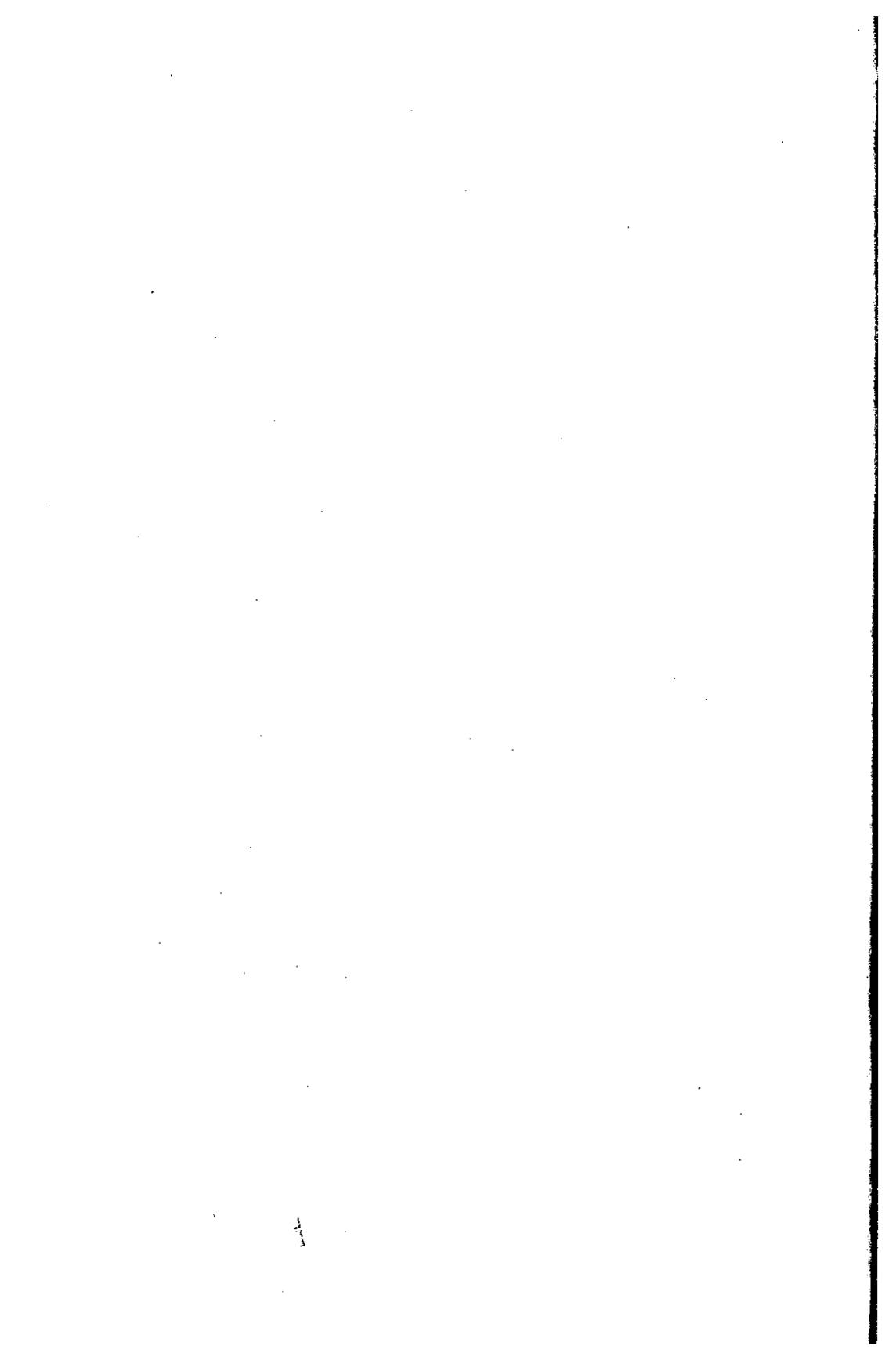
I work hard to help you along. There are two basic approaches to creative nonfiction—memoir/personal essay and immersion nonfiction. I have designed a series of exercises that will help you write one example of each kind of creative nonfiction.

By the time you finish this book, especially if you read it more than once, you will have written an immersion and a memoir. I am not saying it will be ready to send to an editor or agent, but you will have a solid draft to begin to shape and polish—and revise and revise.

So much for this introduction. Now let's begin to read, think, and write.

Part I

WHAT IS
CREATIVE
NONFICTION?



The Birth of the Godfather

I'm in the elevator in the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning, the tallest classroom building in the world. I'm heading for the English Department on the fifth floor where I'm teaching. But I'm uncomfortable and ill at ease because of what's recently happened.

Then the elevator doors glide open and there standing before me is my colleague Bruce Dobler, a short, broad-shouldered fellow with a toothy smile. When he notices me, he raises his eyebrows and then drops to his knees, grabs my hand, and says, with breathless reverence, "I kiss your hand, Godfather."

And then as I watch, confused and astounded . . . he does just that—with a loud, wet *smmmack!*

In the moment I had no idea why he was acting so crazily—but then it hit me. Bruce must have read James Wolcott's *Vanity Fair* article making me look like a snake oil salesman and (maybe worse) a "navel gazer." I was embarrassed to be presented to the world in that context—in *Vanity Fair*, with its more than a million readers (1,157,653 in 1997), to the chic literati, the movers and shakers, so to speak. That's why I'd been so out of sorts that day.

The article was an ambush; neither Wolcott nor *Vanity Fair* had interviewed or contacted me. A former student had discovered it the night before my elevator encounter with Dobler while she was browsing through the new magazines at a supermarket checkout counter. She'd telephoned

me with the news that morning. I'd considered hiding out and not leaving my house for a while, but I soon realized how silly that was. And then at the Cathedral of Learning elevator, Bruce Dobler showed me how I would need to adjust to and appreciate my fifteen minutes of fame and celebrity.

Wolcott had also ridiculed others in his diatribe against the genre I'd been writing, editing, and championing for years—creative nonfiction—but he'd singled me out as the worst of a bad bunch. Wolcott had said it in big bold letters, and it was an unforgettable label to be stuck with. Not only was I a “navel gazer,” I was something worse. He'd dubbed me the “godfather behind creative nonfiction.”

When I first read the article I was mortified. It wasn't good to be roasted in such a prestigious national magazine, not good for my image as an English professor and my rapport with my conservative academic colleagues—or so I thought. But Dobler got the picture and made me remember what Oscar Wilde had said about criticism: “The only thing worse than being talked about—is not being talked about.”

On the upside, being lambasted in *Vanity Fair* attracted attention to the genre. Over the next few years, many people began to read and experiment with creative nonfiction. As a result it enjoyed unprecedented growth and was transformed into an expanding literary movement with an unbridled momentum—it became the fastest-growing genre in the literary and publishing worlds.

In 1997, when Wolcott disparaged me as the godfather, many people were writing and reading creative nonfiction, which, of course, is why it was a topic to target. But Wolcott didn't realize that few people knew what to call the form, how to write it, or where to try to publish their work. With Wolcott's article and *Vanity Fair's* million-plus readers, people began to understand that what they were reading and writing had a name—a label—as well as a rationale and a burgeoning audience. From that time on, creative nonfiction became the genre to contend with in the literary world—the literature of reality.

The Definition Debate

James Wolcott was not the only one ridiculing creative nonfiction, although the reasons for the ridicule varied. Mostly, at least at the outset, the problem was the word “creative.” On the one hand, it was thought to be pretentious. Academics especially found this to be troubling. Their mantra was that you don’t *tell* people that you’re being creative—they’re supposed to recognize it and tell you.

Journalists also opposed the term “creative,” although for different reasons. Creativity, they insisted, meant making things up—fabricating facts—something journalists are never supposed to do. (Just ask William Randolph Hearst or Jason Blair!) To avoid the word “creative,” some academics and reporters began calling the genre “literary nonfiction” or “literary journalism.” Neither label caught on.

“Literary” sounds as pretentious as “creative.” And although most creative nonfiction contains a journalistic element (depending, of course, on how you define journalism), the assumption that all creative nonfiction was also journalism was inaccurate.

Prior to the use of the term “creative nonfiction,” this kind of writing had gained popularity as the “new journalism,” due in large part to Tom Wolfe, who published a book by that title in 1973. But that term led to debate about the use of the word “new.” A.J. Liebling, George Orwell, James Baldwin, and Lillian Ross, to name only a few masters of the literature of

reality, were publishing their work a half century before Tom Wolfe—so what was new about the “new journalism”?

Recently the word “narrative”—as in “narrative journalism” and “narrative nonfiction”—has gained popularity. Everyone has personal stories or narratives: politicians, movie stars, businessmen and women. Yet creative nonfiction does not strictly adhere to one narrative form; there’s the lyric essay, the segmented essay, and the prose poem, all of which can be nonfiction.

But in the end, the name game is a waste of time and energy. It doesn’t matter what you call it; much more important is how you define it—and how you make it work.

WHAT IS IT—OR ISN’T IT?

The banner of the magazine I’m proud to have founded and I continue to edit, *Creative Nonfiction*, defines the genre simply, succinctly, and accurately as “true stories well told.” And that, in essence, is what creative nonfiction is all about.

In some ways, creative nonfiction is like jazz—it’s a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques, some of which are newly invented and others as old as writing itself. Creative nonfiction can be an essay, a journal article, a research paper, a memoir, or a poem; it can be personal or not, or it can be all of these.

The words “creative” and “nonfiction” describe the form. The word “creative” refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. But the stories are true.

The word “creative” has been criticized in this context because some people have maintained that being creative means that you pretend or exaggerate or make up facts and embellish details. This is completely incorrect.

It is possible to be honest and straightforward and brilliant and creative at the same time. Albert Einstein, Jacques Cousteau, Stephen Hawking,

and Abraham Lincoln are just a few of the brilliant leaders and thinkers who wrote truthful, accurate, and factual material—and were among the most imaginative and creative writers of their time and ours.

The word “creative” in creative nonfiction has to do with how the writer conceives ideas, summarizes situations, defines personalities, describes places—and shapes and presents information. “Creative” doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen, reporting and describing what wasn’t there. It doesn’t mean that the writer has a license to lie. The word “nonfiction” means the material is true.

The cardinal rule is clear—and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader—the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative nonfiction: “You can’t make this stuff up!”

WHO COINED THE TERM “CREATIVE NONFICTION”?

Nobody knows, exactly. I’ve been using it since the early 1970s, although if I were to pinpoint a time when the term became “official,” it would be in 1983, at a meeting convened by the National Endowment for the Arts to deal with the question of what to call the genre as a category for the NEA’s creative writing fellowships. Initially, the fellowships bestowed grant money (\$7,500 at the time; today, \$20,000) to poets and fiction writers only, although the NEA had long recognized the “art” of nonfiction and was trying to find a way to describe the category so writers would understand what kind of work to submit for consideration.

“Essay” was the term used to describe this “artful” nonfiction, but that didn’t quite capture the essence of the genre. Technically, scholars of all sorts were writing “essays,” but these were usually academic critiques—not accessible in style or content to the general public, even the most informed. Newspaper columnists were writing “essays” in a way, but these were mostly short opinion pieces, lacking the narrative and the depth of research artful essays demanded.

The word “journalism” didn’t fit the category either, although the best creative nonfiction does require a significant aspect of reportage. For a while the NEA used the term “belles-lettres,” a kind of writing that favors

style over substance. If nothing else, the pomposity of the term was off-putting. None of these labels captured the essence of the compelling, character-driven, story-oriented literature they were seeking. Eventually one of the NEA members in the meeting that day pointed out that a rebel in his English Department was campaigning for the term "creative nonfiction." That rebel was me. From that time on, the commonly accepted name for the kind of writing we're examining in this book was "creative nonfiction."

The Fastest-Growing Genre

Despite the controversy over its name—or perhaps because of it—creative nonfiction has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities.

These days the biggest publishers—HarperCollins, Random House, Norton, and others—are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry. (I'm distinguishing here between “literary” and “popular” fiction; the latter includes work by master storytellers like John Grisham and James Patterson.) Recent creative nonfiction titles from major publishers on the best-seller lists include Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*, Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun*, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle*. Even small and academic (university) presses that previously would have published only books of regional interest, along with criticism and poetry, are actively seeking creative nonfiction titles these days. The University of Nebraska Press, Other Press, McSweeney's, Feminist Press, Graywolf Press, and many more have won major publishing awards, such as the National Book Award or the National Book Critics Circle Awards, and attracted new literary audiences for their creative nonfiction titles.

In the academic community generally, creative nonfiction has become the popular way to write. Through creative writing programs mostly within English departments at small colleges and large universities, from Princeton to Iowa to Columbia, students can earn undergraduate degrees, MFA

degrees, and PhDs in creative nonfiction—not only in the United States but in Australia, New Zealand, and throughout the world. Creative nonfiction is the dominant form in publications like the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Vanity Fair*. You will even find creative nonfiction stories featured on the front page of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. We will look at some examples of that later in this book.

If you leaf through magazines published in the 1960s and 1970s (you may have to use microfiche), you'll see that creative nonfiction was dominant then as well. Gay Talese, Truman Capote, Lillian Ross, and Norman Mailer regularly contributed what we now call creative nonfiction to the magazines noted above as well as to magazines that no longer exist, like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Review*.

The big difference between then and now is that this artful nonfiction is rapidly growing, while readership and sales of literary and popular (paperback) fiction have remained stagnant or decreased—and that the genre now has a name most everyone accepts.

SUBGENRES

Just like poetry and fiction, creative nonfiction includes subgenres. In poetry, subgenres have to do with form, while in fiction subject matter and voice often signify divisions. “Chick lit” is mainly written by women for women, addressing women’s issues often in a lighthearted manner, such as *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger. Detective, spy, and mystery novels, like John Grisham’s *The Firm* or Tom Clancy’s *The Hunt for Red October*, invariably appear on fiction best-seller lists.

Like these titles, most fiction published today is “popular.” These books appeal to a broad audience and focus more on plot than characterization and style, which are more “literary.” Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are examples of literary fiction that has managed to attract a popular audience, perhaps because Franzen is able to probe and criticize, in an amusing way, the American middle class.

Many categories in nonfiction storytelling—creative nonfiction—relate to specific subjects, such as baseball, business, science, and law. If your work belongs to a particular subject matter, you have a built-in audience that can

be pinpointed and categorized. The bookstore buyer or manager will know exactly where to place your book. The downside to categorization is that your book can be isolated from the general browser/reader who is not interested in, say, psychology or golf. However, bookstore categorization may not matter as much in this age of online browsing and electronic book buying. The challenge is to target your niche audience by concentrating on subject while, at the same time, enticing the general reader by making the subject seem secondary and the characters and the narrative primary and irresistibly compelling. This dual appeal to a dual audience can be very effective—and profitable.

CROSSING GENRES

Some people refer to creative nonfiction as the fourth genre—behind drama, poetry, and fiction. But creative nonfiction is also a second genre for some prestigious writers. Ernest Hemingway, the Nobel laureate best known for fiction, wrote stirring creative nonfiction like *Death in the Afternoon*, his paean to bullfighting. George Orwell, James Baldwin, John Updike, Phillip Roth, Truman Capote, and David Mamet have distinguished themselves equally in fiction or drama, and in creative nonfiction. Mary Karr, Diane Ackerman, and Terry Tempest Williams were poets first before discovering the potential of creative nonfiction, which has brought them fame and fortune.

Creative nonfiction is not only the second genre for some authors but it's also the second profession for many distinguished men and women. Scientists like Oliver Sacks, historians like Edmund Morris, movie stars like Rob Lowe, comedians like Tina Fey, journalists like Bob Woodward, and baseball players like Jim Bouton are all writing or have written successful and compelling works of creative nonfiction.

POETRY IS (OFTEN) CREATIVE NONFICTION

Poetry can be closer to nonfiction than you might imagine. Many poets contend that their poems are, in essence, nonfiction—spiritual and literal truth—presented in free form or verse. What some people refer to as the

“lyric” essay can be poetry. In composing the lyric essay, writers emphasize artfulness over information. Meditation takes precedence over narrative, logic, and persuasion. Poets Claudia Rankine (*Don't Let Me Be Lonely*), Lia Purpura (*On Looking*), and anthologist/writer John D'Agata (*The Next American Essay*) have been championing the lyric essay most recently. The skills and objectives of the best poets are the skills and objectives most vital for those who write factual pieces.

One of the most formidable challenges of the nonfiction writer is to learn to develop a targeted focus. We devote weeks, months, and sometimes years to the study and observation of different subcultures, places, and ideas. For any given piece, journalists and essayists can tell many stories, go off on dozens of tangents, while gradually coming to focus on the meaning of their research, ideas, and interviews.

The best poets consistently control not only the structure of their poems but also the scope and range of vision. They are able to translate and communicate complicated ideas with compact specificity, even as they are being informative and dramatic, which is what good creative nonfiction is all about. Some poets are oriented toward the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) propagation of a social cause; this is also in the deepest and noblest of journalistic traditions. Poetry and journalism can pursue the same ends and are not as far apart as you might think. Poets and journalists are often in sync, seeking “larger truths.”

FLEXIBILITY, FREEDOM, AND THE LARGER TRUTH

Gay Talese, in the introduction to *Fame and Obscurity* (1970), his landmark collection of profiles of public figures including Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, and Peter O'Toole, described his work specifically and the new journalism generally, in this way: “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* [my italics] 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.”

This may be creative nonfiction's greatest asset: it offers flexibility and freedom while adhering to the basic tenets of reportage. In creative non-

fiction, writers can be poetic and journalistic simultaneously. Creative non-fiction writers are encouraged to use literary and cinematic techniques, from scene to dialogue to description to point of view, to write about themselves and others, capturing real people and real life in ways that can and have changed the world.

What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows but also encourages writers to become a part of the story or essay they are writing. This personal involvement creates a special magic that can help alleviate the anxiety of the writing experience; it provides satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility, and freedom.

Truth Or . . .

James Frey was an alcoholic, a drug addict, and a criminal. He went to prison for three months where he endured torturous experiences, including a series of root canals—without painkillers—but he survived and in the end courageously rehabilitated himself. He then wrote a raw confessional book so moving and life changing that Oprah Winfrey was seduced by its power and drama. Oprah featured him on her show as “the man who kept Oprah up all night.” The book, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), became a national best-seller. It made millions of dollars and catapulted the writer from invisibility to fame and fortune.

The Smoking Gun, a website that specializes in investigative reportage, later published an in-depth exposé of the book. Based on a six-week investigation, it outed Frey as a liar and phony—the biggest literary fake since the early 1970s when Clifford Irving pretended to have written a biography of the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes. Among the many exaggerations and fabrications, Frey had not gone to jail for more than half a day, the root canals without pain medication never happened, and his description of a friend’s suicide was untrue. The moral of the Frey tale is that if you make stuff up, you very likely will get caught and there will be consequences. Frey has blamed his addiction for his miscues.

Since being outed, James Frey has published other books, fiction and nonfiction, which have sold fairly well. But his credibility remains seriously

damaged. Oprah lambasted him on her show and he was criticized on a TV special devoted to the controversy on CNN's *Larry King Live*.

James Frey was not alone in deceiving readers. Stephen Glass, fresh out of the University of Pennsylvania, became a sought-after young reporter in the nation's capital, producing breathtaking pieces for the *New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times*. But his most significant talent was his ability to fabricate stories and then cover up his lies. By creating fictitious websites and sketching out invisible and nonexistent sources, along with phony URLs and telephone numbers, Glass maintained his charade. According to H. G. (Buzz) Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights*, who profiled Glass for *Vanity Fair*, it was "the most sustained fraud in modern journalism."

Glass disappeared for five years, attending law school, and emerged in 2009 to promote a novel based on his life, *The Fabulist*. CBS's *60 Minutes* also profiled Glass in 2009 as he promoted his book. Glass was hoping to pass the New York state bar at that time. He had passed the written exam, but "there are questions about his character and his fitness to pass the bar," according to *60 Minutes*. Glass will probably not easily—and perhaps never—return to the journalism field. Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*, told *60 Minutes*: "He's a worm. I have no place in my heart for him any longer."

Glass was contrite in his *60 Minutes* interview. But in response to interviewer Steve Croft's question, Is the person being interviewed "really Stephen Glass or just another character that he has invented?" former *New Republic* executive editor Charles Lane, who eventually helped expose Glass, replied: "If it was sunny outside and Steve and I were both standing outside in the sun and Steve came to me and said, 'It's a sunny day,' I would immediately go check with two other people to make sure it was a sunny day."

HALL OF FAME OF FAKERS

Frey and Glass were rank amateurs compared to Clifford Irving, whom *Time* magazine named "The 1972 Con Man of the Year," after being caught

trying to fool the world with his fake biography of Howard Hughes. Irving went to prison for seventeen months.

Not long after the Irving/Hughes scandal, Lillian Hellman, the respected playwright, published her memoir *Pentimento* (1973) that, among other things, detailed how she smuggled money to her childhood friend Julia, who was resisting the Nazis in Vienna. The book was made into a movie in 1977 (*Julia*) starring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave. But ten years later, Yale University Press published Muriel Gardiner's memoir, *Code Name "Mary,"* which was so close to *Julia's* story that most critics believe Hellman lifted the story from Gardiner.

Other popular stories scrutinized for truth and accuracy include *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, John Berendt's best-seller about a murder in Savannah. Berendt has admitted to making up dialogue and rearranging the story chronology. Oprah was fooled a second time by Herman Rosenblat. His manuscript "Angel at the Fence," under contract but not yet published, dramatized a Holocaust love story, depicting Rosenblat's first encounter with Roma, the woman who was to become his wife. He was in a concentration camp and she, disguised as a Christian farm girl, tossed apples over the camp's fence to him.

Rosenblat wrote that he never forgot this wonderful woman—and when they met on a blind date a decade after the war, he embraced and married her. Oprah was so moved that she hosted the Rosenblats twice, calling their romance "the single greatest love story" ever written. When it was discovered that the story was fiction, Berkeley Books canceled publication in 2008.

Question: But why didn't the editor—or the publisher—make certain Frey and Rosenblat were telling the truth?

Answer: Publishers usually shift responsibility to the author. Publishers contend that they cannot afford to take the time or spend the money to do the necessary fact checking. They require the writer to sign a contract attesting to the manuscript's veracity.

Question: So they're off the hook?

Answer: They hope they're off the hook—but they can be sued as easily as can the writer.

Question: But this doesn't make sense. The publisher has so much more to lose than the lowly writer.

Answer: Publishers also have more attorneys to protect them.

Question: Well, isn't it the case that a disclaimer protects everybody—writer and publisher? Just print it in the front or the back of the book that the story is true to the best of your ability. Like the old TV show *Dragnet*: "The names have been changed to protect the innocent."

Answer: It might help, but it is no guarantee you are protected.

Question: And I can also get the people I am writing about to sign a permission disclaimer form which pretty much grants me freedom to use their names and stories and to write about them in ways I feel are most effective. That's the other thing I can do to protect myself, right?

Answer: Let's say it is not totally wrong. Disclaimers and permissions may help your case if you are sued, but there's really no guarantee that the terms you define will be recognized and enforced in a legal dispute. And asking people you are writing about to sign a permission/disclaimer form might make them think a second time about cooperating with you. It will put them on edge.

Question: So what's a writer to do?

Answer: Read the upcoming fact-checking section (as well as the sections on slander and libel and truth telling) and protect yourself in every way possible. Don't rely on your editor or publisher to come to your defense—especially when you are under attack by the media, an attorney, or a person about whom you have written. You're on your own. And in some ways, this is best, for you are the master of your own destiny. It is up to you to safeguard the covenant between you and your reader by being responsible for your own credibility.

Truth and Fact

Say you're sitting in a local Starbucks with my most recent ex-wife and she's telling you all of the reasons she decided to divorce me. She names my flaws one by one. By the end of the conversation, you understand how difficult it was to live with me, a workaholic, always traveling, constantly complaining, and never wanting to settle down. And even when I'm home, I insist on waking up at 4:30 AM seven days a week. I was too difficult to be married to, so it's understandable that she had to divorce me.

Now that you know her side of the story, you say good-bye to my ex-wife and walk down the street to another coffee shop for your meeting with me. This place is called The Coffee Tree Roasters. The front window can be lifted automatically, kind of like a garage door. It's sunny and warm today so we sit and talk by the open window, enjoying the comfort of the sun, refreshed from time to time by a cool breeze.

Meanwhile, I sip my fifth cup of coffee so far today—it's only 11:00 AM—while I tell you, detail by detail, reason after reason, why my latest marriage collapsed. She knew I was a writer, and she knew what kind of life I led before we were married; after all, we'd lived together for five years before we made it official. But she was always complaining, wanting me to change—and her mother hated me and made our lives miserable. Yes, it was her decision to get divorced, but the marriage was her problem, not mine.

Less than an hour later, you're out the door, waving good-bye to me through the window. You think as you walk down the street and get into your car, after listening to both of those stories, it almost seems like two different marriages, so opposite were the perceptions of the former spouses. For a moment, you wonder which of us to believe. Who's telling the truth? And then you realize: possibly we both are.

Truth is personal—it is what we see, assume, and believe, filtered through our own lens and orientation. Although it may revolve around the same subject or issue, the truth as one person perceives it may not be the same truth another person sees. I didn't make anything up about my ex-wife. I told you honestly how I saw the dissolution of our marriage. And my ex-wife was equally honest with you about me; she gave you her perspective on why our marriage failed.

There are many truths to a story and many versions of the same story. Here in the United States, juries often hear eyewitnesses testifying under oath about the same murder or robbery scene or incident; these witnesses often give many conflicting details. Jurors may be left with an impression of two or three different men or women committing the same crime.

Let's contrast truth with willful fabrication. James Frey lied. His six hours in jail may have *seemed* like three months—but they weren't and he knew the facts. Stephen Glass lied and went through elaborate machinations to mislead his editors and his readers. He simply made stuff up. These authors weren't writing creative nonfiction. They weren't even writing fiction. They were dishonest, violating the trust between writers, editors, publishers, and readers. Glass and Frey knew the truth and altered it for their own benefit.

My ex-wife and I—and most creative nonfiction writers—tell stories as we remember them, even though aspects of our stories may conflict. Our perceptions are different, as was yours when you heard both of our stories. Your perception of our marriage will probably fall somewhere between the two versions you heard. And your recollections of your encounters with us on that particular morning, and the stories we told, may be as flawed and conflicting as ours were about one another.

FACT CHECKING

This does not mean that you as a creative nonfiction writer have a clear field to write anything you remember—or anything others remember, if you're telling someone else's story. There are facts in all stories that cannot be blurred or changed by perception. Description and detail—like how many floors are in the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh—can be confirmed. The date of the *Vanity Fair* article, the words I attribute to both Wolcott and Wilde—all of that can be confirmed and much more, usually with research.

Is that really the Coffee Tree around the corner from Starbucks in my neighborhood? Does it have a front window that can be raised like a garage door? It's the responsibility of the creative nonfiction writer to confirm every fact that can be confirmed. Is the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh on the fifth floor? And was it located there at the time this incident occurred? If not, and a reader is aware of this inaccuracy, then how can the reader be sure of my credibility?

Then there's truth that can only be confirmed by memory and perception. Did Bruce Dobler drop to his knees or just bend down? Did he kiss my hand or just feign kissing it and make a smacking sound with his lips? Was he having fun with me or making fun of me? Was this an act of respect and appreciation—or derision? We could ask Bruce, of course, and he'd give you his interpretation, which may well differ from mine. However he responds, we'd both be telling the truth from our perspective. (Bruce Dobler died in 2010, so for purposes of verification, the only remaining eyewitness to this event, as far as I know, is me.)

Because a blurry line exists between fact and truth, readers will usually make a judgment about the veracity of the stories being told and ideas presented based on their faith in the narrator. The higher the credibility of the storyteller, the more accepting readers will be. Making stuff up, no matter how minor or unimportant, or not being diligent in certifying the accuracy of the available information, endangers the bond between writer and reader. You don't have to be objective or balanced in presenting your narrative, but you must be trustworthy and your facts must be right if you're going to be a credible writer of creative nonfiction.

FACT CHECKING SEDARIS

Readers love David Sedaris. He's clever, funny, and self-effacing. His books have sold more than 7 million copies, and when Sedaris performs in person, he knocks the audience dead.

But Alex Heard, a veteran magazine editor who once worked with Sedaris, thought that some of Sedaris's stories seemed far-fetched, that his characters were conveniently eccentric—perfect to write about—and that the dialogue was sometimes too precious and perfect to believe. So Heard fact-checked many classic moments in Sedaris's books and wrote a three-part article about what he found out, which was published in 2007 in the *New Republic*. Heard retraced Sedaris's childhood, from which much of Sedaris's classic work emerged, and he interviewed his relatives and friends, including Sedaris himself. Heard discovered that Sedaris radically embellishes many of the situations he describes and often fabricates dialogue, a fact that Sedaris, when confronted, admits: "I exaggerate wildly, for the sake of the story. Mostly in dialogue," he once told the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

Three examples follow, first from *Naked*. Heard visited Empire Haven, a woodsy retreat in the Finger Lakes region of New York, the nudist colony Sedaris profiled. He interviewed Empire Haven's co-owner, Marleen Robinson, who was able to identify Dusty, a *Naked* character whose comic function in the story is to ridicule Sedaris about his citified ways.

"Oh," Dusty sputters at one point, "you're all just so sophisticated sitting in your little cafés and looking up at the Empire State Building while the rest of us lie around in haystacks smoking our corn cob pipes."

In another story, Sedaris writes: "Here's a woman on a bus ride from North Carolina to Oregon, hollering about her baby's shiftless father: 'I said, I got a good mind to call him Cecil Fucking Fuckwad, after his daddy, you ugly fucking fuckwad.'"

And finally in a third piece, here's David's mom, Sharon Sedaris, discussing David's nervous tics with his second grade teacher: "I know exactly what you're talking about. The eyes rolling every which way, it's like talking to a slot machine. Hopefully, one day he'll pay off, but until then, what do you say we have ourselves another glass of wine?"

Are they true? Did these conversations take place and was the dialogue accurate? Sedaris told Heard that the Dusty quote is partly fabricated and the other two are totally made up.

Sedaris fabricated not only conversations but descriptions of places, characters, and entire situations. Not always, Heard points out. For example, Sedaris “really did hitchhike from Ohio to North Carolina with a girl in a wheelchair,” described in “The Incomplete Quad.” Heard’s point was that Sedaris is funny and more or less harmless in most instances, but he is an untrustworthy narrator. Sedaris not only admitted to his *sins* (my italics) but didn’t seem to care that he had been outed by Heard. He told a reporter from *Newsday*, “I’m probably lucky the person [Heard] who wrote it is so incompetent.”

Heard’s investigation triggered a dialogue about the latitude humorists should be allowed. “Exaggeration and embellishment are what allow humor to suggest larger truths,” according to the *Raleigh News Observer*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* said, “A humorist has lots of latitude because funny things don’t usually write funny.”

But these are shallow and inadequate observations. Real stories, factual stuff, reported accurately and skillfully, can evoke many emotions, from humor to tragedy to fear. It doesn’t follow that humorists alone should receive a free pass—and a shortcut to larger truths. There are countless larger truths in politics, war, or science that can be illuminated and made more raw and poignant through fabrication and exaggeration. I have no problem with Sedaris (or James Thurber, for example, or Woody Allen) radically embellishing true stories, but let’s call them what they are: fiction. Humor is not subject to another set of rules in nonfiction.

HAVE I TOTALLY D’AGATA-ED THIS?

Am I making a big deal out of truth, accuracy, and fact checking in creative nonfiction? Yes! And for good reason: honesty and credibility are the bone and sinew, the essential irrefutable anchoring elements of nonfiction. Besides, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to make stuff up. How can lying to readers do you, the writer—or them—any good?

But this is John D'Agata's premise in the book *The Lifespan of a Fact*. According to D'Agata, changing facts, altering truth is justifiable if you do it in the name of art. This sounds preposterous, but his ideas have attracted some attention—mostly, not surprisingly, animosity.

The book's back story begins in 2003. D'Agata had written an essay on assignment for *Harper's* about a teenager who committed suicide in Las Vegas. The essay was rejected because of factual inaccuracies. This should be the end of the story and the essay. What magazine would want to publish a nonfiction piece rejected because the author was not being truthful? But *The Believer* agreed to publish it.

Jim Fingal, an intern fresh out of college, is assigned to fact-check D'Agata, who rejects the notion that he needs to be fact-checked or for that matter, that he's expected to be truthful. Fingal does his job, calling out D'Agata sentence by sentence, word for word, on what he calls the "factual disputes" (and "factual quibbles" and "factual nudgings"). D'Agata vehemently resists any changes, no matter how blatantly wrong he may be.

For example, when Fingal proves that there are thirty-one strip clubs in Las Vegas and not thirty-four as claimed, D'Agata says: "The rhythm of 'thirty-four' was better in the sentence than the rhythm of 'thirty-one,' so I changed it." And when he swaps the name of a bar from "Boston Saloon" to "Bucket of Blood," it's okay, because "'Bucket of Blood' is more interesting." And when Fingal demonstrates that D'Agata's information about how many heart attacks took place during a certain time period in Las Vegas—there were eight, not four—and asks if the text should be changed, D'Agata replies: "I'd like to leave it as it is."

Fingal is astonished: "But that would be intentionally inaccurate . . . Aren't you worried about your credibility with the reader?"

"I'm not running for public office," D'Agata replies. "I'm trying to write something that's interesting to read."

And so it goes. D'Agata is an associate professor teaching creative nonfiction writing at the University of Iowa, and the author or editor of four books, so he should know better—and I am sure he does. So what is he up to? You could say, as some have, that he is lazy, unwilling to follow through with the heavy and often tedious background work to get it right. You could

say he doesn't care about his responsibility as a writer to tell a story and enlighten his readership, or even the people about whom he is writing. You could say—and I would agree—that D'Agata is downright arrogant.

The writer, through history, has always tried to make a difference, to touch readers, to make them aware of what is going on around them. We have learned that information, enhanced by story, can be ammunition: our weapon for change. President Obama made his entire staff read a *New Yorker* essay by Atul Gawande about ways to control the rising costs of health care. Gawande spotlighted the health care system in McAllen, Texas, where patients suffer through twice as many cardiac surgeries as the national average, ambulance spending is four times higher and health care costs during the end of life are eight times higher, and compares health care costs in similar size towns in order to spotlight unnecessary waste and mismanagement. Some of the ideas from Gawande's piece ended up in the Obama health care package, and so the consequences of misreporting—or inaccuracy for any reason—could have been profound.

There are many wonderful books of creative nonfiction that are dramatically, stylistically, rhythmically powerful and factually accurate that have made a difference, some of which are excerpted or discussed here—from Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, most recently, to Susan Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Is There No Place on Earth for Me?* We could all make such a list of books and writers whose spellbinding narrative nonfiction has helped influence public opinion while remaining true to fact: Rachel Carson, John Hersey, Ernest Hemingway, Ernie Pyle. They were all reporters.

Not D'Agata, who tells Fingal, "I am not a reporter and I have never claimed to be a reporter." This may be true, on a certain level, but it is nevertheless a ridiculous claim: all nonfiction contains a significant amount of reportage. (For that matter, so does most fiction.) In his essay, D'Agata is—accurately or not—reporting, researching, and interviewing. In creative nonfiction, the reporting may be filtered by a writer's perception and the use of narrative, but that does not mean we are creating characters and situations—nor does it mean that we are willfully altering facts. We are recreating, as vividly as possible, in dramatic form, what we think hap-

pened. That said, it's also our responsibility to relate the facts we know—without purposefully altering them.

D'Agata, however, maintains that the information in essays doesn't have to be factually accurate. It may be, in the classic informal essay, that style often takes precedence over substance—but the substance must nevertheless remain reliable and accurate. Fabrication is fiction. Most people recognize that creative nonfiction is a challenge in balancing substance with style—based in the belief that the substance is most important and the style is the vehicle that makes the substance more compelling to a larger readership.

But D'Agata is not really writing for the general public. For what it's worth, he acknowledges this. And this acknowledgment, I believe, answers my earlier question about what he's up to.

As you will see on page 60, D'Agata helped introduce the term “lyric essay” to university creative writing programs. He has vigorously promoted the lyric essay, and the term has captured a bit of cachet. Interestingly, D'Agata's initial definition of the lyric essay conflicts with his current attitude toward fact. The complete definition can be found on page 60, but D'Agata and his mentor Deborah Tall say “the lyric essay has an overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.” *Allegiance to the actual*: that, to me, clearly implies a loyalty to truth and accuracy.

Yet he contradicts himself repeatedly, insisting that he has an appreciative audience. As D'Agata tells Fingal during their debate about the importance of four versus eight heart attacks: “The readers who care about the difference between ‘four’ and ‘eight’ might stop trusting me. But the readers who care about interesting sentences and the metaphorical effect that the accumulation of those sentences achieve will probably forgive me.”

His colleagues will probably forgive him. They may even make jokes (like one of my colleagues, who said that she totally “D'Agata-ed” something she wrote, meaning that she fudged it), and they will speculate about the income D'Agata will make on his book tours and through his interviews.

But can anyone trust him? Frey has salvaged his career to a certain extent and Glass turned his life of lying into a novel. But respect for their character and motives will be illusive, as it will be for D'Agata.

"I guess I'm confused; what exactly are the benefits of using 'four' versus 'eight' in this sentence?" Fingal asks D'Agata at one point. This is a question that D'Agata obviously cannot answer without admitting to the emptiness of his argument. His reply is telling:

"I'm done talking about this."

CREDIBILITY—AND CORRECTNESS

An annoyed reader recently discovered a factual mistake in an essay we published in *Creative Nonfiction*. A description of Lake Tahoe was "absolutely false," he wrote. "Lake Tahoe is NOT 'the largest and deepest body of fresh water in the United States', Lake Superior is the largest, at 31,700 square miles and containing 10% of the fresh water in the world. Crater Lake in southern Oregon . . . is the deepest lake in the United States at 1,932–1,949 feet and over 300 feet deeper than Lake Tahoe. Lake Tahoe is merely the largest ALPINE lake in the United States." It was "a big difference," the disgruntled reader concluded in his email.

Chances are it was not a big difference to most readers, who were probably oblivious to this fact. It didn't seem to make a big difference in the content or impact of the essay, either. So why should we at *Creative Nonfiction* care? What's the big deal?

To this reader, the big deal was that the writer was being lazy. She didn't fact-check herself—an easy task that would have taken her "a couple of clicks with the mouse on the internet." *Creative Nonfiction* was at fault, as well. "Editors and/or fact checkers at your magazine should have caught this blatant mistake. It would have saved the writer from embarrassment in a national literary magazine, since other readers undoubtedly caught it, too, over such an easily recognizable research flub."

Checking for factual accuracy is usually not complicated. You can question or debate "truth"—how I see a certain subject or remember a certain incident may be different from your perception and recollection. But the size or the depth of a lake or the number of floors in a classroom building can and should be researched and confirmed.

Factual accuracy is different from personal truth. A reader who knows that a writer is careful about the facts is often predisposed to accept the

writer's version of the truth. If we can't rely on writers to Google the details in their essays, then how can we believe the questionable contentions in their stories, especially in situations where we must take the writer's word? It's a question of credibility.

"I'm not surprised that this writer would make such an error (we all have if we write long enough)," the annoyed reader continued, "nor do I care whether the rest of her writing is marvelous or not . . . but, to be truthful, I didn't finish the piece because if there are obvious errors of fact in the first two pages, you immediately lose me as a reader."

This Lake Tahoe gaffe was a mistake, an oversight, easily correctable, and because it was so easily correctable it shouldn't have been allowed to happen—not by the writer or the editors. The writer lost a reader and the magazine may have lost a subscriber.

Based on True Story

WHAT ABOUT THE BOTS?

In 2010, *The King's Speech* starring Colin Firth was the movie to watch—it was the story of King George VI of Britain, his ascension to the throne, and the speech therapist who helped him control his stuttering so that he was able to address the British people with thoughtfulness and power.

Following close behind in attention and vying for Oscar honors was *The Social Network*. This movie begins in the autumn of 2003 when Harvard undergrad and computer programming nerd Mark Zuckerberg, played by Jesse Eisenberg, sits down in his dorm room and creates Facebook, triggering a revolution in communication and a multibillion dollar corporation. In both movies, the viewer learns a great deal about the two protagonists, as well as the cast of characters surrounding them and the temper of the times. Maybe.

Question: Are these movies anchored in fact? Are they true?

Answer: Yes and yes. And no and no. They're a hybrid form of moviemaking called BOTS—based on a true story.

BOTS are a popular and often profitable part of our artistic culture. Directors like Oliver Stone have carved a significant reputation making such

films. Stone has produced, so far, a presidential trilogy, beginning most recently with *W* in addition to *JFK* and *Nixon*. There are Academy Award-winning BOTS from past generations, such as *Patton* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, for which George C. Scott and Peter O'Toole, respectively, won best actor Oscars. BOTS contain many factual elements but are mostly fiction.

We're not talking only movies here. Hundreds (and maybe thousands) of novels are based on true stories. Classics like Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, Leon Uris's *Exodus*, and James Michener's *Hawaii* come immediately to mind. These authors never pretended anything else. They were well aware that "nonfiction" is an absolute. You can't be half dead. And a story described as half true is false—and is therefore categorized as fiction. If your son tells you he took the car, drove to the convenience store, bought a candy bar, and talked to a friend, when in fact he smoked a joint with his friend, despite the fact that everything else in his explanation is accurate, he's in the end not telling the truth and is making stuff up.

This is not to say that the writers and directors and even the actors haven't done their research to capture the period in which the BOT story takes place, through costumes, mood, and spirit. But in all of these stories, as riveting and powerful as they are, the filmmakers turn away from fact

EXERCISE 2

You should be reading all the time you are writing. So purchase copies of the magazines you most appreciate, the places where you think you want to see your own work published. We're talking the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, among the best. Begin to study what other writers are doing from a craft point of view and also how they are treating subject matter. And as you go through this book, try to recognize many of the ideas and techniques we are discussing here—from legalities to dialogue to overall structure and connect and relate them to the writing you are doing now. Remember you are teaching yourself to read like a writer, as well as a reader.

and construct scenes that never occurred, introduce characters who didn't exist, and often alter the endings to please or shock an audience.

Creative nonfiction cinema—documentary films and docudrama in the theater—is a completely different exploration and experience. The camera is the reporter. The camera's eye reveals the images and ideas, conversations, and confrontations. Who will ever forget the drama, the suspense, the tearful and moving story Morgan Freeman narrated in the 2005 film *The March of the Penguins*? No words, images, or ideas are falsified. Freeman interprets what he or the writers might assume about the penguins' migration or what they say, but he does not fabricate, no matter how tempting.

Yet documentary films don't claim to be objective or balanced. The director chooses what to show a reader and what footage to leave on the cutting room floor. And the narrator or writer interprets for viewers the meaning of the footage they're seeing—at least from his or her point of view. Michael Moore (*Bowling for Columbine*, *Sicko*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and many more) insists all of his documentaries are fact-checked, which is undoubtedly true. But he selects which ideas, characters, and incidents to present—and which to leave out.

The writer of creative nonfiction can be subjective and establish a personal point of view, as Michael Moore does. But being opinionated can alienate readers. Sometimes, to make a point, a lighter touch can be effective. People who are free to make up their own minds often believe with more fervor and conviction. So remember when you're telling your story, you're not writing an op-ed piece. You may want to influence readers, but you need to do so subtly.

INTERESTING READING

Margaret Robison's memoir *The Long Journey Home* came out in May 2011. Robison is the mother of Augusten Burroughs, the author of his own well-known childhood memoir, *Running with Scissors* (2002). His brother, John Elder Robison, also wrote a memoir about the family and about growing up with Asperger's syndrome, *Look Me in the Eye* (2007). John's book takes place, more or less, during the same time and place as the memoirs of his

EXERCISE 3

In Exercise 1, I asked you to recreate a scene or situation from your past that led to something bigger or more significant that you might want to talk about. Something that opened a door to a larger conversation. And I provided you with an example—the day I became a “godfather.” This opened the door for me to talk about the genre of creative nonfiction, the definition, the parameters, and even the pitfalls. Now I am about to tell you another story, which will lead to another series of topics that I will discuss in this book. It is a police or mystery story, although not necessarily a crime story, as you will see.

But first, I want you to make your story or stories lead somewhere—shape the narrative so that they segue to a conversation or an examination of issues of substance. Where do the stories take you as a nonfiction writer dispensing information and ideas to a reader? You have your incident or situation. Now make it mean something bigger.

Note: Look carefully at what I have done in the next chapter. I have told a story, and that story leads to the substance of my information and my message.

brother and his mother. Each book is very different and each contains differing accounts of key events in the family's life. All three bring their own perspective, style, and talents to their respective memoirs. You might look at these books as a kind Rashomon of memoirs, where the divergent stories offer new insights into one family, while none of them capture the whole truth of the family and none of them are false. The bottom line, as I have said, is that factual accuracy is much easier to achieve than total truthfulness because facts can be nailed down, while truth is elusive and undeniably personal. When writing creative nonfiction, you must attempt to achieve a chain of truths: be true to your story, true to your characters, true to yourself.

WHO WILL TAKE CHARGE?

I began this section by introducing famous fakers and exaggerators of the creative nonfiction/journalism world and the punishments and pitfalls of crossing the line from nonfiction to fiction—taking the leap.

By “leap,” I mean taking chances, pushing the boundaries too far, crossing the line, purposely or mistakenly. And I have tried to present ideas and actions to help you safeguard yourself and the people about whom you are writing.

But who or what will be the final arbiter if things go wrong? Where is the Clint Eastwood-like enforcer, the guy who knows the rules and devotes his life to making certain no one breaks them?

You will soon meet the creative nonfiction police officer—sort of!

The Creative Nonfiction Police

I've just completed a reading at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. It's a Thursday evening after a day of classes and now I'm answering questions about essay writing. Writing nonfiction so that it reads like fiction, I tell the audience, is challenging. Some critics say it is virtually impossible, unless the author takes liberties in style and content that may corrupt the nonfiction, making it untrue or partially true. A comment from John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is indicative of the danger inherent in the form. Berendt says he made up transitions in order to move from scene to scene in his book to make the experience more enjoyable for his readers, a process he called "rounding the corners."

This is the subject we're discussing in the auditorium after my reading—what writers can or can't do in walking the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction. The questions pile up as the audience becomes engaged. "How can you be certain the dialogue you're 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 aren't inside their heads?"

I try to explain that 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 in exasperation and say, "Listen! I'm not the creative nonfiction police."

There's a woman in the audience, someone I'd noticed earlier during my reading. She's in the front row—hard to miss—older than most of the undergraduates, blonde, attractive, in her late thirties maybe. She has the alert yet composed look of a nurse, a person only semirelaxed, always ready to act or react. She's taken her shoes off and propped her feet on the stage; I remember how her toes wiggled as she laughed at the essay I'd been reading.

Many people chuckle when I say, "I'm not the creative nonfiction police." But this woman suddenly jumps to her feet, whips out a badge, and points in my direction. "Well, I am," she announces. "And you're 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's gone. My host says the woman is a stranger. No one knows her. She's a mystery to everyone, especially me.

This incident occurred about a decade ago—and I have returned to read and teach in Austin twice since then. And each time I keep expecting the woman with the badge to reappear—and arrest me. Wherever I go, she's on my mind, lurking in the shadows of my consciousness and making me aware that in some ways I am being watched, forced always to consider the ethical and moral boundaries inherent in creative nonfiction.

How do we distinguish between right or wrong, exaggeration and fabrication, true and untrue, honest and dishonest—decisions so challenging to writers of creative nonfiction? Fact checking is a vital beginning, along with doing what's right—following the old-fashioned golden rule by treating your characters and their stories with as much respect as you would want them to treat you and the important people in your life. But there's more to it than that. The mystery woman—call her *conscience*—is a reminder and an invisible arbiter over us all.

THE OBJECTIVITY DEBATE

The hard facts of the Watergate scandal were reported in an explosive series of articles in the *Washington Post* by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

But anyone who reads their 1974 book *All the President's Men* will be presented with a complete and well-rounded story. They describe their characters with three-dimensional perspective, and they analyze and debate

intricacies and conflicts inherent in the story from the characters' points of view.

Much of this is missing in their *Post* accounts, as are the adventures and challenges of the reporters themselves as they reconstruct the Watergate break-in, fight to discover the reason it happened, and try to identify the perpetrators of the crime as well as the people who masterminded the failed caper. That personal dimension is part of the story the *Post* missed—which is the privilege and leeway of creative nonfiction.

Journalists are often most critical of creative nonfiction because of this truth-fact separation. And certainly there's a measure of doubt, when credibility is at issue. But there's also a dark side to journalism. The reporter's mission is to report the news with objectivity and balance, not take sides or give one aspect of a story more attention than the other. We all know by reading the *New York Times* or watching Fox News that objectivity in journalism doesn't exist—it's merely empty rhetoric. Objectivity is impossible unless, perhaps, you're a robot. Even then, the software that helps robots think is written by men and women who have ideas and opinions of their own.

The creative nonfiction writer need not worry about being balanced and objective. The creative nonfiction writer is encouraged to take a side, to have a point of view, to demonstrate that he or she can think, evaluate, summarize, and persuade—within the boundaries of truth, accuracy, and good taste. This subjective orientation is one of many ways to distinguish between the traditional nonfiction writer and the creative nonfiction writer. While it is best for the creative nonfiction writer to seem fair, fairness, like objectivity, is nearly impossible to achieve. How a creative nonfiction writer tells a story, even when using the same facts as a traditional journalist, can influence a reader in many different ways.

COMPOSITES

We all know the story. Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of Daniel Defoe's 1719 book, is marooned for twenty-eight years on a desert island, completely isolated from civilization and sporadically threatened by cannibals, pirates, and mutineers.

Many readers once thought *Robinson Crusoe* was a true story—some still do—and the author probably based part of his novel on at least two different real-life castaway characters. The book was a composite of their adventures, heavily embellished by Defoe's imagination. Despite the authentic connection, Defoe was writing fiction and didn't try to fool people into thinking otherwise.

More than 250 years later, however, Janet Cooke, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, was awarded the 1981 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 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, some have not learned from her mistakes.

In February 2002, the *New York Times Magazine* revealed that a boy profiled in its pages, an Ivory Coast laborer who cut weeds on a cocoa plantation for slave wages, was a composite. The author, Michael Finkel, a contributing writer for the magazine, was fired. At first Finkel was defiant and dramatic. "I hope readers know that this was an attempt to reach higher—to make something beautiful, frankly," he told *New York* magazine. A half dozen years later he admitted in his 2006 book, *True Story: Murder, Mayhem, Mea Culpa*: "I thought I'd get away with it. I was writing about impoverished, illiterate teenagers in the jungles of West Africa. Who would be able to determine that my main character didn't exist?"

Sometimes it is the editor, sometimes a critic, but usually it is the reader who ferrets out a phony. Which is why you can't make stuff up. You are violating the overarching mission of creative nonfiction—to tell true stories and to provide your audience with unforgettable and impactful factual insight and information. It is unethical, immoral, and downright unnecessary to make stuff up, since truth is usually more evocative and certainly more convincing than fantasy.

COMPRESSION

Henry David Thoreau lived for two years on Walden Pond, but he conflated those two into one in his book *Walden*, published in 1854. Which

part of the two years did he choose? How often, in his painstaking process of revision, did he combine two or three days—or even four weeks—into one?

Thoreau employed “compression,” combining multiple incidents or situations in order to flesh out the narrative. This technique allows a writer to build a compelling, three-dimensional story with more ease and fluidity.

In her book *In the Freud Archives* (1984) Janet Malcolm combined a series of conversations with Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, former projects director of the Sigmund Freud Archives, into one long conversation. Masson subsequently sued Malcolm and the *New Yorker* magazine, which published an excerpt from the book, contending that Malcolm manufactured quotes in this conversation. He wasn't aware of her use of compression until he saw their conversation in print much later. Malcolm didn't admit to altering facts in their conversations—only when and how the conversations occurred.

The case took nearly ten years to play out, ending up in the U.S. Supreme Court. Masson lost his suit, although Malcolm was criticized for her sloppy reporting. Some of the quotes attributed to Masson were in fact wrong, but use of the technique of compression, although debated vigorously by opposing counsels, was deemed legal. So does compression violate an ethical or moral bond with the reader or the subject? Probably not, as long as the information isn't manufactured—which is another subject entirely. But it is always a good idea to tell your reader if you've compressed the events in your work. You can do this easily in an author's note at the beginning or end of the book or you can insert the information into the text. But you don't want readers to think, in the end, that they have been misled.

MANUFACTURING DIALOGUE

There is a question that always comes up when creative nonfiction is discussed: “How do you know, if you weren't there, that such a conversation went on and what the participants said?” Or, “How can you remember, word for word, even if you were there, what everyone said?” Or finally, “Don't the quotation marks mean that the dialogue is accurate word for word?”

The use of quotation marks traditionally signifies authenticity. Some writers, like Sebastian Junger in the 1997 best-seller *The Perfect Storm*, write dialogue without using quotation marks. And Frank McCourt, in his blockbuster 1996 memoir *Angela's Ashes*, chose to italicize dialogue. Many writers see nothing wrong with using quotation marks in recreated scenes, contending that readers know the writer didn't (as with McCourt during the Great Depression) carry around a tape recorder or video camera to record every memorable conversation in his life.

I like using quotation marks in recreated dialogue. Since my readers know it is recreated, it's clear I am not trying to bamboozle them—and I think quotes make text read more smoothly. Readers have been programmed to hear the words in their mind when they see the “quotes” and I want to establish and maintain such authenticity.

But I can appreciate the use of italics or some other signal that the quotes are recalled or recreated speech, if the writer feels it's important to send such a message (“this is not totally reliable, not word for word”) to the reader. Which is the better way is kind of a coin toss. The idea is to replicate the conversation vividly and to mirror memory and speculation with trust and good judgment.

NAME CHANGING

Question: You can probably say anything you want about a person in a book or an essay if you change that person's name. Then you're protected from lawsuits, right?

Answer: Many people think that—but it isn't true. You aren't protected from their temper; they can still hit you over the head with a frying pan. And you aren't necessarily protected legally, either.

Question: I can just say I am writing fiction, right?

Answer: If a person is identifiable, if you've left a birthmark on his right cheek or a tattoo on his forearm, or he has a recognizable accent, you could be in big trouble. Just because you contend that you are writing fiction, even if your contention is legitimate, you are not shielded from litigation.

In 1993 David Leavitt wrote *While England Sleeps*, the story of a relationship between two homosexual men right before World War II. The book triggered controversy because of its graphic gay sexual encounters. This was 1993, after all. The book's notoriety led to the discovery that it was a thinly veiled life of the respected British poet Stephen Spender. Leavitt eventually admitted that the book was based on Spender's 1951 autobiography, *World Within World*. In Leavitt's version, the protagonist—Spender—was presented in a way that could well have harmed the poet's illustrious reputation. Spender filed a lawsuit that ordered Leavitt's book off the shelves in England—and forced Leavitt to do a significant rewrite for a second edition published in the United States.

Spender is more or less famous, so it didn't take much work to identify him as the model for Leavitt's character, but what about people who are not famous? If a person is recognizable to friends, families, colleagues, and business associates, and is portrayed in a way that would damage his reputation and therefore his livelihood, then the writer can also be liable in the same way as Leavitt was. Truth, of course, is the best defense, although not as good as demise.

LIBEL, DEFAMATION—AND WRITING ABOUT THE DEAD

Let's get back to one of my ex-wives. No matter what I say about her—no matter how scurrilous my remarks may be—if what I say is true, it's not libel. And even if what I say is false, if I utter these falsehoods only to her or write them to her in a letter or an email, it's still not libel. On the other hand, if I write something scurrilous and untrue about my ex-wife and share my views with others in an article or blog or letter, then I could be in trouble, guilty of libel . . . maybe.

Maybe? Well, technically speaking, libel is a false and defamatory statement in writing about a third party. If what I've said embarrasses or annoys my ex-wife, she may not forgive me, but she won't win a lawsuit against me. But if my remarks are untrue and hurt her reputation in a way that she'll be harmed personally or professionally, then that would be defamatory and it would be time for me to call my attorney to defend myself, or cut a deal.

So lesson 1 is to be honest, accurate, and ever so careful. And lesson 2 is to understand the caveats and exceptions inherent in the law. In certain situations, there's a difference between stating an opinion and stating a fact, for example.

A fact can be verified, but if my ex-wife says something about me that can't be verified, then it's probably an opinion. *Hustler* magazine once maintained that evangelist Jerry Falwell had sex with his mother. Falwell sued and the case was eventually dismissed, the court ruling that the statement was too outlandish (it was parody) to be true. Falwell's mother was unable to deny the accusation, since she was dead.

The libel bar is much higher for public figures—movie stars, politicians, sports figures—than for the average person. This is why so many people could accuse Barack Obama of not being a U.S. citizen and get away with it (an ongoing accusation prior to his election in 2008, continuing even into 2012), even if it hurt his reputation and caused him to lose his next election. On the other hand, since I'm not a public figure, if my ex-wife stated that I wasn't a U.S. citizen and my reputation was harmed by her assertion—readers spurned my books, for example—then I might be serving her papers.

Is anyone immune from defamation and libel? No one who's alive, that's for certain. But writing about dead people is generally a good safety zone. In most states, you can't libel a dead person no matter how hard you try. There are, however, a few exceptions. Under certain circumstances, in a few states, like Rhode Island, California, or Texas, false or defamatory statements about a dead person can lead to litigation. In all circumstances, when lawyers are involved, it is best to be super careful and check out the state statutes to cover your bases.

INTERESTING BUT NOT SO AMUSING FUDGING

In 1999 there was a national debate over the legitimacy of the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Edmund Morris. While working on the authorized biography of Ronald Reagan, he wrote himself into the book as a fictional character to flesh out Reagan's hidden and puzzling personality.

To be fair, Morris wasn't misleading his readers; he made clear that he was fictionalizing himself in the text of *Dutch*. This decision, however—to fictionalize an important aspect of an authorized biography—created an uproar that was covered in the *New York Times*, on *60 Minutes*, and elsewhere. Over the years, historians have come to accept the scholarship of *Dutch*, but Morris's leap of style—from nonfiction to fiction—remains controversial and in some viewpoints unacceptable in academia. However, Morris wasn't writing for his colleagues. *Dutch* was serious but targeted to a general audience.

SHARE YOUR WORK WITH YOUR SUBJECTS

One way to protect the characters in your book, article, or essay, as well as to allow them to defend themselves—is to share what you've written about them before publication. Few writers go to this trouble, but sharing your narrative with the people about whom you're writing doesn't mean you have to change what you say about them; it only means that you're being particularly responsible to your characters and their stories.

I understand why you might not want to share your narrative with your subject; it could be dangerous. It could ruin your friendship, your marriage, or your future, or it could ignite resistance and lead to litigation even before your book or essay is published. But by the same token so could publication of your book or article, if the information is incorrect—with serious damage. This is the kind of responsible action you might appreciate if the situation were reversed.

I have on occasion (not always) shared parts of my books prior to publication with people I've written about—with positive results—by reading excerpts to them. This is a good practice to consider. Characters appreciate hearing and considering what I have written, and have corrected mistakes. But more importantly, when I come face-to-face with a character, I'm able to communicate on a more intimate level. When I show or reveal to my subjects what I think and feel—when they hear what I've written about them—some of them get angry, which is also interesting to observe and write about. But most of the time they're gratified to be brought into the process before the work is published.

Notice that I have read excerpts to my characters so that they may “hear” what I have written about them. This is because I don’t surrender hard copy. I make it a point *not* to allow my subjects to share what I’ve written about them with others. Attorneys, spouses, friends, even neighbors, then become part of the dialogue. You lose control. So instead of asking them to read and review, I read what I’ve written to my subjects and tape-record their remarks. They hear what I’ve written—and we can go off on valuable tangents at the same time—but they can’t nitpick my work at their leisure.

COVERING YOURSELF

Lauren Slater, whose work you’ll read later in this book, often protects herself this way. At one point in her controversial 2004 book, *Opening Skinner’s Box*, Slater writes that the distinguished Harvard University psychologist Jerome Kagan, to illustrate a point he was making about free will, suddenly jumped up and ducked under his desk. After the book was published, Kagan was annoyed, perhaps embarrassed by his actions, and told a writer from *The Guardian* the event didn’t happen. He said that ducking under his desk *could* happen, if he chose to do so. Some weeks later, a reporter from the *New York Times* confronted Slater with Kagan’s denial—and she handed him a transcript from an email exchange she’d had with Kagan. Slater had sent Kagan a prepublication fact-checking list in which she’d written “in demonstrating to me that people do, indeed, have free will, you jumped under your desk,” to which Kagan had responded: “I was trying to demonstrate that when humans have a choice of actions, they can select an act that has never been rewarded in the past.” Slater had thought ahead, suspecting that such a prestigious academic might not like to look foolish, even if it was his own doing—or in this case, his undoing.

FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT ETHICAL, LEGAL, AND MORAL BOUNDARIES

There are no rules, laws, specific prescriptions—that’s the first thing to remember—and there’s no one person who can be considered the creative nonfiction police or the final arbiter, not even the godfather. The gospel

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.

Rounding corners or compressing characters or incidents isn't absolutely wrong, but if you do experiment with these techniques, make certain you have a justifiable reason. Making literary decisions based on good narrative principles is often legitimate—you are, after all, a writer. And you and your work can benefit when you take chances and break rules. But be careful and give your actions significant thought. No harm in trying and experimenting, but consider the consequences to you and the people about whom you are writing before you click "send."

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 may harbor resentments, hatreds, and prejudices; but being writers doesn't give us a special dispensation to behave in a way unbecoming to ourselves and hurtful to others. This sounds simple—yet it's so difficult. Write both for art's sake and for humanity's sake. In other words, we police ourselves. As writers we intend to make a difference, to alter people's lives for the greater good. To say something that matters—this is why we write, to have an impact on society, to put a personal stamp on history. Art and literature are the legacies we leave to succeeding generations. We'll be forgotten, but our books and essays, our stories and poems can survive us, whether on the shelves of libraries or in the ether of the Internet age.

Wherever you draw the line between fiction and nonfiction, you need to remember the basic rules of good citizenship: don't create incidents and characters who never existed; don't write to do harm to innocent victims. Don't forget your own story, but while considering your struggle and your achievements, think about how your story will affect your reader. Beyond the creation of a seamless, engaging narrative, you're trying to touch and affect someone else's life—which is the goal creative nonfiction writers share with novelists, storytellers, and poets. We all want to connect with other human beings in such a way that they'll remember us and perhaps share our legacy with others.

Someday I hope to connect face-to-face with the woman in the Austin audience at St. Edward's, the one with the police badge and the bare feet. I've never forgotten her. She has, in some strange way, become an accoutrement to my conscience, standing over me as I write, forcing me to ask the questions about my work that I'm recommending to you now. I'm hoping you too will feel her shadow over your shoulder each time you sit down, approach your keyboard or notebook, and begin to write.

Schedules

I have asked you to write and have provided some exercises to help you get started. I am well aware of challenges that you may be facing. Writing is difficult, time-consuming, sometimes painful or tedious, and almost always frustrating. And certainly not as profitable as you'd like. So how do you keep writing on a regular basis so that you produce the work you intend to—and make the impact your work deserves? As I have already pointed out, there is no enforcer character to help you tow the line. But you can motivate and energize and excite yourself by being your own police person. Listen to Annie Dillard.

In her book *The Writing Life* (1989) Dillard writes about schedules—hers and others': "A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time."

She describes the routines of many writers, including poet Wallace Stevens who regularly got up at 6:00 AM, read for two hours, and then walked three miles to his office at the Hartford Insurance Company where he dictated poems to his secretary before selling the policies that generated his income.

Jack London wrote twenty hours a day; he set his alarm to wake him after four hours of sleep. "Often he slept through the alarm," says Dillard, "so . . . he rigged it to drop a weight on his head." Dillard confesses that she doesn't believe this story, though she jokes that "a novel like *The Sea*

Wolf is strong evidence some sort of weight fell on his head with some frequency.”

On Cape Cod, Dillard, who won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction for her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, worked in a prefabricated tool shed, eight by ten feet, crammed with her computer, printer, copier, air conditioner/heater, and coffeemaker. When she became too interested in the world outside her shed she cut out squares of paper and pasted them over each pane of glass in the windows. Then, so as not to feel so boxed in, she painted birds, trees, and wildflowers on the paper.

You do what you can, whatever works for you, to keep writing on a regular basis. You need to create a writing schedule and keep it sacrosanct. If becoming a writer means enough to you as a person, then, as I have said, you will police yourself. But more importantly, writing should become a voluntary part of your life—not a forced internment. Many writers complain about the agony of the writing experience, but the mere thought of giving it up, even for a week, would be anathema.

SLAVE TO ROUTINE

John McPhee, who has written more than thirty books and traveled around the world, is mostly a person of regimentation and routine. He has an office on the Princeton University campus where he writes and, when he's not on the road, arrives there every morning at about 8:00 AM. With rare exceptions, he'll stay there throughout the day—writing or thinking about writing.

He admits that sometimes during those long solitary days waiting for the words to come he'll fall asleep, but he knows by the end of the day he's expected—he expects himself—to produce one to two thousand words to add to his growing manuscript. He'll walk home with the new pages tucked into his tote bag, have a martini, and perhaps read some of what he's written to his wife, his most trusted critic, for comment or criticism.

We can't all be fortunate enough to have offices on college campuses or the time to write most of the day, but McPhee's routine demonstrates what writers must do to progress and produce. Writing for a living is not like

staying up all night to write a paper for a college professor. Writing is a process that requires slow and steady building and shaping.

A regular schedule is essential. I've never known a writer who's published regularly who doesn't write regularly—and have some sort of idiosyncratic routine, with or without martinis. Hemingway preferred wine and whiskey to martinis, but he always bragged that he was up in the morning pounding away at his typewriter no matter how late he was out “living the writer's life” the night before.

I don't expect most of my readers to be full-time writers, although I'm hoping to help you get there one day. If you have some flexibility, it's best to choose a time and place that's comfortable and quiet and allows you to experience as much clarity as possible. For me, it's the predawn hours, but for others it may be midnight—or later. When I suffered from insomnia, I'd walk by my neighbor's house and see his third floor attic light on at 3:00 AM, his prime time for clarity. He was an academic and a single dad, but also a writer—and after he said good night to his children, he began his most serious work.

The need for a regular schedule isn't limited to writers. One early spring morning many years ago, when I got up and out of bed and dressed, with my first steaming mug of coffee in hand, I heard the sweet music of a woodwind wafting through the silence. It was beautiful and entrancing as I went to my keyboard and started my work. I listened to the music as I wrote. Far from disturbing me, it enhanced my experience that day. But in the back of my mind I wondered where it was coming from and why I was hearing it that day. Finally I put the puzzle together. My new neighbor Tom, who'd moved into the little carriage house behind my house, was principal flutist of the renowned Pittsburgh Symphony.

Later Tom and I discussed the similarities of our work. “But don't you rehearse every afternoon at Heinz Hall or wherever you are performing?” I asked him.

“Yes,” Tom replied. “But you have to practice regularly—not just to get better, but to maintain your high standards.”

His statement helped me understand that every draft I wrote was practice for the next draft I wrote. My final manuscript was like Tom's perfor-

mances—some magnificent and others only marginal. Practice may never make perfect, but it certainly makes you better.

Michael Jordan, one of the world's greatest living athletes, once explained his philosophy and outlook on life: "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been trusted to take the game winning shot and I missed. I have failed over and over again in my life . . . that is how I have succeeded."

Writers and athletes are similar in this way. It doesn't matter how much raw talent we have if we don't exercise our muscles and our brains in a sustained and uninterrupted effort to hone our skills. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods were not born superstars. They worked and practiced with sustained and concentrated dedication in order to achieve greatness. This intense commitment to dedication and practice begins with passion.

PASSION AND PRACTICE

Most every writer has a special way of preparing to get to work and keep working, and a goal for a satisfying stopping point for the day. Some writers, like McPhee, need to fight their way through the piece from beginning to end, producing a rough draft before going back to the manuscript to add shape and clarity. But William Styron once told me his goal was to write a page a day, and to write it again and again on that day, until it was the best page he thought he could write—and then he wouldn't return to it again. Because he had a bad back, Hemingway wrote standing up, as did Thomas Wolfe. Since Wolfe was a giant of a man at 6 feet 7, he often wrote on top of his icebox, which was higher than any table he could find.

Wolfe wrote with brute passion, for days at a time, sometimes flinging the pages of his manuscript onto the floor of his kitchen apartment in New York's West Village, forgetting to number them. It's said that his editor, the famous Maxwell Perkins, was often seen rooting around Wolfe's apartment, looking for the lost flying pages and trying to figure out where in Wolfe's deep and intense narratives they belonged. When he could write no more, Wolfe roared into the streets of the city, living life with the same passion and abandon that animated his writing.

There was a time when I experienced similar explosions of exhilaration and exhaustion as Thomas Wolfe's paper slinging. After writing through a day or night, I'd leap onto my motorcycle and thunder into the country, feeling the cold night air blowing in my face—as I contemplated the dark anonymity of the highway. Hours later, sipping coffee in a truck stop or diner, I sketched with words the tired faces and recorded the conversations of my fellow travelers. These were wonderful, formative experiences for me, although frenetic and wild, especially when I soared through those dark country roads on two wheels.

Passion is what's required of a creative nonfiction writer—passion for people, passion for the written word, passion for knowledge, passion for spontaneity of experience, passion to understand how things work. As Joan Didion said in a *New York Times Magazine* article titled "Why I Write" (1976), "I write to find out what I am thinking, what I am looking at, what I see, and what it means."

I know it is easy to provide examples of famous writers (and athletes), but what about people laboring alone and in the dark, who have yet to achieve success? They may be reluctant to tell people they are writers, lest someone ask what they have published and whether they have appeared on the best-seller list. This is a difficult barrier to cross—to have faith and confidence in yourself, knowing in your heart that someday you will prove your worth and that your practice and passion will lead to satisfaction and success. This is the challenge almost all writers confront: their own unique "rope test."

THE ROPE TEST

I'd assumed, as did most of my friends and family, that when I enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard I'd have an easy time of it, physically. After all, Guardsmen were the shallow water sailors. Little did I know that because we were operating on the coast (protecting our shores from enemy aggression), we were always running like hell on land instead of powering through the waves in a boat like true seamen.

A signal on the bell tower—three staccato chimes—triggered a favorite drill in basic training. When we heard these chimes, we recruits were obliged to grab our rifles and bayonets, dash to meet an invading enemy,

and do combat in the water. Traditional Coast Guard boot camp when I was a grunt in the 1960s was twelve weeks, versus the Army's nine-week stint. This was because people who came into the Guard were usually in suboptimal physical condition and because we had more instructional classes, such as semaphore and maritime law.

After twelve weeks of basic, I was the only member of my company who didn't graduate and join a unit. I'd lost some eighty pounds at this point—I'd entered weighing 220 pounds—and was now as fit as I'd ever been. Needless to say, the food was not as appealing as my mother's cooking.

But no matter how hard or how often I tried, I couldn't pass the rope test. We were supposed to climb a fifty-foot rope, with knots spaced evenly for handholds; we had to get to the top and then control our descent. There are other ways of boarding an invading ship, but when a rope is the only answer, a Coast Guardsman must be prepared.

After boot camp graduation ceremonies (from which I was barred), I said good-bye to my fellow recruits, now assigned to units across the country and abroad. I would be anchored to the boot camp base until I could pass the rope test. "We'll keep you in this compound," Chief Petty Officer O'Reilly assured me, "for however long it takes."

During the day I worked with a maintenance crew—men who were in the brig for minor offenses—inside a large abandoned furnace, chiseling away at the burned-on soot and debris without seeing natural light between breakfast and lunch and lunch and supper. At that time, masks were unheard of. I breathed in the coal dust all morning and coughed it out at night. Working so long and hard while breathing that sooty material, by day's end I lacked the energy and will to climb the rope or even work out with free weights to strengthen my upper body. I began to think I'd serve my entire hitch as a "boot." The rope test seemed beyond me.

In the recreation hall one Saturday afternoon, I wandered aimlessly toward a door in the back of the room behind the pool hall and saw a plaque that read "Library." I entered a new world.

The books I found in the library were the same stuff I'd been reading at home: Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories*; Frank Slaughter's novels about physicians in every conceivable milieu; Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (I identified with Biff, not an admirable character, but what a stupendous

nickname); Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*; *The Diary of Anne Frank*; Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

This library allowed me some privacy, a place to sit in a soft chair and think, with no one talking or telling me what to do or forcing me to salute. Books were stories, and the stories I read took me to another dimension of time and place where people, some of whom I could identify with, were confronting problems similar to those plaguing me.

My involvement in the stories of other people's lives, real or make-believe, helped me assess and eventually reshape my own priorities. Here was Philip Roth's protagonist in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), frustrated by his inability to be accepted in a world that, ironically, he knew in his heart he did not want to be a part of, as I had wanted to be accepted in my school and neighborhood.

Ernest Hemingway's 1925 story "Big Two Hearted River" (published in his first story collection, *In Our Time*) captured and reinforced my search for solitude, which Hemingway experienced on the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. Within weeks, I could feel myself changing. Reading the stories of others gave me the self-confidence I needed to become stronger and more independent—and I was physically shrinking. The uniforms I'd been issued when I enlisted hung from my body like curtains.

I never made a conscious decision to try to lose weight; it just started happening. I started to get up early in the morning and do hundreds of extra push-ups and sit-ups before reveille. At lunch, instead of eating or smoking, I'd take long walks around the compound, reading as I walked. Or I went into the men's room and practiced pull-ups on the toilet stall walls. I stayed behind closed doors because the guys with whom I shared furnace-cleaning duty were in detention, not because they were too fat or couldn't pass the rope test. They wouldn't have taken kindly to my public display of extra physical training. Their attitude was that we had enough PT in our regular routine. In the evening I was back in my private library sanctuary, reading and working out.

After following my secret regimen for six weeks, I surprised my superiors and myself by showing up at the gym one evening and literally bounding up the rope from floor to ceiling, almost effortlessly. I touched the top with one sure hand and then skittered down again without using my feet.

When I got to the bottom the first time, I showboated by going up again—and back. It was a triumphant moment, not just because I succeeded but because I pulled it off with ease.

Suddenly the possibilities and potential of my life became evident. Passing the rope test more than satisfied Chief O'Reilly. I could now go on to other postings and other challenges—like writing creative nonfiction.

FALL DOWN NINE TIMES—GET UP TEN

The rope test had been a life test for me. I'd never forget—I'd never permit myself to forget—that there were few limitations to my potential, as long as I had a goal in mind and I persisted. I could and would climb the rope, any rope, anywhere, no matter how long it took, how much effort it required.

Along the way, I adopted two slogans that became guiding principles for me. The first comes from an organ transplant surgeon I met while I was doing research for one of my books, *Many Sleepless Nights* (1988). He was talking with a patient who was waiting for an organ transplant—and slowly dying. He paraphrased Winston Churchill's appeal to the British people in 1941 in the darkest days of the German blitzkrieg, telling his patient, "Never give in, never give up. Never. Never. Never. Ever."

Later I looked up Churchill's exact words: "Never give in, never give in. Never. Never. Never. Never. In nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense."

I remember that the patient somehow responded; he managed to live a few more days until a heart became available. I lost touch with this man after his surgery, and I don't know if he lived or for how long, but the message his heart surgeon told him remained imprinted on my mind. I'll never give in and I'll never forget how much I might achieve in my life if I keep trying. Not trying means capitulation.

The second slogan comes from another sick person, an old friend who had battled depression throughout his life and slit his wrists on his wedding day. His new wife discovered him bleeding nearly to death in the bathroom. Paramedics saved his life.

A few weeks later, when I visited him at home, I asked him why he was able to look so cheerful and how he was managing to project a positive

image after what he'd been through. He chanted for me the little song he'd heard in the suicide unit—the ward where every patient was under twenty-four hour observation—in the psychiatric facility where he'd recuperated.

While he was lying in bed in the dark, the door to his room wide open so nurses could maintain constant surveillance, he could hear a man singing to himself. This man, he found out later, had lost his wife and child in an auto accident some years ago. He'd been driving. Since then he'd suffered severe and paralyzing fits of depression. He'd frequently tried to hurt himself, but, according to the nurses, he always seemed to rally and recover and try to get on with his life. He was strong enough to leave the hospital—frequently—but not strong enough to manage his depression at home for a sustained period of time. His song was simple and relentless, my friend said, and eerie to hear again and again, but the message, so clear and simple, struck home with him: “Fall down nine times . . . get up ten.”

This is the lesson every writer must learn—each piece of creative writing is a separate challenge. Writing a book is like having a baby and raising it to adolescence. A long-form essay, say 5,000 words, is comparable to a surgical procedure. Okay, perhaps I'm exaggerating. But the writer is the mother or the father of the book. It's your creation, even if you're writing nonfiction. You'll describe and shape the lives of your characters, plan for their future, and suffer when they take you off course—which they will.

Question: What about preparing an outline before starting to write?

Answer: Even if you begin writing with an outline of your essay or book, from Roman numeral I to X or XX, you don't really know where the numerals will take you. And I hope that your outline is just a guide and not a straitjacket. You're a writer, and writers, especially those using the artful form of creative nonfiction, are often guided by instinct, as are most creative people in the world. So go with your instinct, especially when writing a first draft, and worry later about fine-tuning the details.

John McPhee often begins the writing process, whether he's working on a book or essay, a long or short form, with the end. McPhee says he likes

EXERCISE 4

My experience with the rope test and the meaningful and memorable lessons I took from it prompted my writing students to refer to my approach to scheduling as “the boot camp way of writing.” This is because I preached the mantra of the regular schedule in all my classes—and my regular routine mirrored the schedule the military had indoctrinated in me during my Coast Guard days. For years, since adopting the writing life, my reveille has come at 4:30 or 5:00 AM. I had many jobs when I was a beginning writer—truck driving, shoe selling, advertising copywriting, and finally teaching, but by getting up in the early morning I was able to attend to my “real” work—my creative writing—when I was the freshest and most clear-minded before I went about the practical responsibilities of my day.

Some of you are already writing on a regular schedule; for those who are not, now is the time to devise one. Think about your life and decide when you are most clear-headed, where you can find a space undisturbed, and what part of your life (early morning, late night, lunch hour with your colleagues) you are most willing to sacrifice. Try all of the combinations until one works best.

to write his last sentence or paragraph right at the beginning so that, from the start of the first draft of his essay or book, he knows where he’s supposed to end up. This doesn’t mean he can predict his conclusion and foresee his final scene at the beginning. But wherever the story takes him, he knows the general direction he will travel. The ending may change by the time he gets there—but he needs to have a road map of sorts in order to get started. Beginning at the ending is his method.

I work differently. I begin my story at the point I feel most excited and involved. I have an idea in the beginning of what I want to say, but I try to let my words and ideas guide me as they burst out onto the page. In the end, there are probably as many writing routines as there are serious writers. The important thing to remember is that the only way you are going to write successfully is to keep on writing until you get it right.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT SCHEDULES

"When I am working on a book or story I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you, and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write. You write until you come to a place when you still have your juice and know what will happen next, and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again.

"When you stop you are as empty, and at the same time never empty, but filled as when you have made love to someone you love. Nothing can hurt you, nothing can happen, nothing means anything until the next day when you do it again. It is the wait until the next day that is so hard to get through" (Ernest Hemingway).

The Creative Nonfiction Pendulum: From Personal to Public

One simple way to approach creative nonfiction is by gauging the relationship of the writer to the subject.

Imagine a pendulum swinging expansively from left to right.

The pendulum swings between what can be called “public” or “issue-oriented” or “big idea” creative nonfiction at one extreme, and on the other “personal” or “private” creative nonfiction. The pendulum can swing radically from one side to the other, strictly personal or strictly public. Or it can swing moderately, merging the public and the private into a rich and compelling prose mixture. When that happens, the jazz of creative nonfiction can become a literary symphony.

THE PERSONAL: THE KISS THAT CAUSED THE CRAZE

The girl is very pretty—blonde, pale, lithe, shy, and sensitive. She’s twenty when it begins, and she knows from the start what she’s doing is wrong, very wrong. But she’s obsessed, can’t seem to stop herself.

She meets him in train stations and airports, art museums and national monuments, and they often rendezvous in the dark confines of her apartment. The trysts go on sporadically for two agonizing years, until finally one day she summons up the courage and resolve to end it.

He takes it badly—he doesn't want to stop seeing her. But in his heart he knows that sooner or later it would come to a bad end, for nothing good can ever come from having an affair with your daughter. Especially when you have another family—a wife and three children hundreds of miles away who have no idea where you go when you disappear and who you are meeting.

Especially when you are a Presbyterian minister and have a congregation of souls to watch over.

Twenty years later, the girl goes public. When Kathryn Harrison's memoir, *The Kiss*, was published in 1997, it was a literary sensation because it was so intimate and revealing. And now she was a married woman and the mother of two young children.

Considering what we see every day on reality TV nowadays or read in the tabloids, Kathryn Harrison's revelations don't seem that shocking to us. But in 1997, the critics went crazy. Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* was so obsessed he reviewed *The Kiss* three times and could hardly find enough invective for his attack. *The Kiss*, according to Yardley, was "shameful, slimy, repellent, meretricious, cynical and revolting."

Mary Eberstadt theorized in England's *Weekly Standard* that Harrison concocted the story because her novels (she'd published three novels prior to the publication of *The Kiss*) weren't selling well. James Wolcott (the guy who named me the godfather), writing in the *New Republic* and wearing his psychotherapist's hat, accused Harrison of "inviting humiliation upon her own children . . . as misery was invited on her."

This is the danger of writing so personally and revealing such intimacies. People will not take you seriously, will contend that you are just trying to attract attention to yourself, or that you are lonely and wallowing in self-pity. But Harrison's book changed the lives of generations of women who had spent a lifetime hiding similar secrets from friends and families, suffering in silence. It is a prime example of the very personal and powerful side of the creative nonfiction pendulum. *The Kiss* was an instant best-seller—and it remains in print today. But, as Harrison discovered, such honesty bred contempt in response to this work but not to the other fine books of fiction and nonfiction she has published since *The Kiss*.

THE MEMOIR CRAZE

James Wolcott was incensed by what he called navel gazing. “Creative nonfiction,” Wolcott said in *Vanity Fair*, was “civic journalism for the soul—a sickly transfusion whereby the weakling sensitive voice of fiction is inserted into the beery carcass of nonfiction.” What he meant was that in creative nonfiction, writers talk too much about themselves, look inside instead of outside—are self-indulgent, whiny, boring people with their own neuroses. In a recent article in *Creative Nonfiction*, Robin Hemley, who writes both fiction and creative nonfiction, makes the point that poets (and fiction writers) are constantly engaging in excess introspection and that the interiority of their ruminations makes their work powerful and provides connectivity to the ordinary reader. It’s a good thing. So why aren’t creative nonfiction writers permitted the same interiority?

It’s true that “public” nonfiction writers like Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* 2006; *The Botany of Desire* 2001) or Dexter Filkins (*The Forever War* 2008) write books that take on big issues like war and politics, food and football. The big issue books will entertain, surprise, and inform you—but they won’t move you in the way a short story or a poem or a memoir may. That’s why memoirs can be so effective. Memoirs reveal the intimacies of ordinary lives—ideas and information that some may criticize as less important than nuclear peril or other major issues. But many writers are convinced small personal issues are just as important as major themes and ideas.

“Back when I was in graduate school in the late 1980s,” writes Hemley, “my friends and I used to classify writers into two types: windows and mirrors. The fiction writers were the windows, writers who looked out on the wide world, and wrote about what they saw. The mirrors were the poets, writers of reflection and meditation. . . . We even named our softball teams accordingly, the Windows vs. the Mirrors.”

But what team included the poor nonfiction writers, the memoirists in particular?

“They could play on neither team,” says Hemley, “because memoirists as we know them today didn’t exist.” That was then and this is now. Times have changed.

The Kiss didn't change the literary landscape by itself, of course. It was published around the same time a half dozen other intimate memoirs were published. Together they triggered what the publishing industry and the book critics referred to with surprise and derision as the "memoir craze."

Angela's Ashes (1996) by Frank McCourt and *This Boy's Life* (1989) by Tobias Wolff were both made into major motion pictures; the British actress Emily Watson starred as McCourt's mother, Angela, and the Academy Award winner Robert De Niro played Wolff's stepfather, Dwight Hansen. *The Liars Club* (1995) by Mary Karr, another of these best-selling tell-all memoirs, rode the new interest in the genre.

Memoirs are not new to the literary world. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a classic of the form as is Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, first published in this country in 1938. *The Kiss*, however, pushed into new territory, with the subject of incest scandalizing both critics and ordinary readers. Even in 1997, book-reviewing venues were drying up, and any controversy that might help sell a few more magazines or newspapers was a boon at the time. Yardley and Wolcott predicted the demise of the memoir as a form, but it remains a significant presence on the literary landscape.

Today the memoir craze continues in full force. Celebrities, politicians, athletes—victims and heroes alike—are making their private lives public. And readers can't get enough of these books. The literature of reality, with all of the pain and the secrets that authors confess, is helping to connect the nation and the world in a meaningful and intimate way.

BETWEEN MEMOIR AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"Am I writing memoir or autobiography?" I'm often asked.

"Are you writing about your entire life, more or less, from the beginning up to the present day?" I inquire. If the answer is yes, then it's probably an autobiography.

A memoir, in contrast, is autobiographical but focuses on one aspect or one period or one incident in your life. Let's say your marriage is falling apart. Week after week, you and your partner can feel your relationship disintegrating. You fight and then you make up, which works for a while, but

the damage is done. The arguing and the name-calling overwhelm the pleasure of making up and coming back together. That significant aspect of your life, the break-up or the threatened break-up of your marriage, may be the window on your life that your memoir will open to your reader.

We won't learn about your great job in the banking industry or your frustrations as a golfer or your problems with acne as an adolescent—unless they relate in some way to the crumbling state of your marriage. If you think of a writer as a camera, a memoirist documents a close-up through the zoom lens, revealing the most intimate and personal details, while the autobiographer shoots a whole landscape with a panoramic lens.

Reading *The Kiss*, we learn very little about Kathryn Harrison except for her two-year affair with her father. The recent best-seller *Eat Pray Love* focuses mostly on Elizabeth Gilbert's odyssey to find herself after a messy divorce. Where she grew up and went to school, what career she had before writing her book are mostly omitted. The only other information Gilbert provides relates to the trauma and challenges of her romantic life.

In Lauren Slater's essay "Three Spheres," included in this book, the reader peers through a window into Slater's life for a few days. But those days are excruciatingly vivid. The power of the memoir is in its concentration, the narrowness of its scope, and the intensity and clarity of its revelations.

Another frequent question I'm asked is this: "What's the difference between a memoir and the personal essay?"

The term "memoir" usually refers to a book. A shorter piece, standing alone, is usually referred to as a personal essay. "Three Spheres," for example, is one of seven essays in Slater's first memoir, *Welcome to My World* (1995). She's written several others: *Prozac Diary* (1999), *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000), and *Love Works Like This: Moving from One Kind of Life to Another* (2002).

DON'T GET TANGLED IN TERMINOLOGY

Academics often refer to the formal and informal essay. What are they? In the introduction to his anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994), Phillip Lopate quotes C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's *A Handbook*

to *Literature* in order to define and distinguish between formal (or impersonal) and informal essays. Holman and Harmon characterize the informal essay as containing “very personal elements, including self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, humor . . . freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation . . . incomplete treatment of topic.” I think the informal essay, the personal essay, and the memoir are very close in content and can be referred to indiscriminately. They fit comfortably under the creative nonfiction umbrella.

In the formal essay “literary effect is secondary to serious purpose.” Formal essays are less personal—or personal in a different way—and are on the other side, the “public” or “big idea” side of the creative nonfiction pendulum. They too fall under the creative nonfiction umbrella: true stories well told.

“Lyric essay” is a term that confounds many people, perhaps because “lyric,” a poetic term, and “essay,” a more fact-oriented term, don’t seem to fit together. But they can fit and often do, as John D’Agata demonstrates in his 2002 anthology, *The Next American Essay*. D’Agata brings together work from such creative nonfiction masters as John McPhee, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, and Annie Dillard to demonstrate the scope of the lyrical form of creative nonfiction, blending biography, poetry, philosophy, and memoir.

As I have mentioned on page 25, D’Agata, along with his mentor, poet Deborah Tall, helped introduce the lyric essay in a literary journal, the *Seneca Review* (a publication of Hobart and William Smith colleges), which Tall edited from 1982 until her death in 2006. Since then, D’Agata has promoted the idea and it’s caught on, primarily in creative writing classrooms. How to define or describe the lyric essay—and distinguish it from poetry? Tall and D’Agata did so with clarity in the *Seneca Review* in 1997. “The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.”

Eve Joseph’s essay “Yellow Taxi,” reprinted in this book (page 169), is an example of a personal essay with strong lyric elements.

The Public or “Big Idea”

One distinction between the personal and the public—or the opposite sides of the pendulum—is that the memoir is *your* particular story, nobody else’s. It’s personal. You own it. In contrast, the public side of creative nonfiction is mostly somebody else’s story; anybody, potentially, owns it, anybody who wants to go to the time and trouble to write about it. Or, conversely, it could be your story in that you have a theory or an idea or a larger point to make about the world. A bigger and more universal idea.

Every week, the *New Yorker* publishes “fact pieces”: creative nonfiction about virtually any subject—from bullfighting to death and dying to transcontinental trucking to poverty in India or game hunting in Africa. There are no limits to the subject matter—except any that the writer and the subject may establish or discover. So it may be your story, but it isn’t personal—it’s a story almost anyone could research and write.

I’ve included examples of the public kind of creative nonfiction in this book, including my essay “Difficult Decisions,” published in the literary review *Prairie Schooner* in 1996, and “Fixing Nemo” by Rebecca Skloot, published in 2004 by the *New York Times*. The first is about a day in the life of Wendy Freeman, a large animal veterinarian. The second documents surgery on a goldfish. Although it took a considerable amount of work on my part to gain access to the vet and on Skloot’s to interview the fish surgeon, almost any writer could have made the contacts, invested the time

and energy, and written these pieces. So each is a public story with an idea behind it.

Because they're so personal, memoirs have a limited audience, while the public kind of creative nonfiction—when authors write about something other than themselves—has a larger audience. These essays are more sought after by editors and agents.

Each issue of the *New Yorker* includes two and sometimes as many as four or five “fact pieces”—public creative nonfiction essays—and usually only one or possibly two shorter “personal history” pieces, which is another way of saying “memoir.” The *New Yorker* is a popular, trendsetting magazine, so the frequency of public versus personal essays in its pages is important. *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and other magazines have a similar mix.

THE UNIVERSAL CHORD: WHEN PERSONAL AND PUBLIC COME TOGETHER

The driving force behind creative nonfiction has everything to do with attracting and keeping the reader interested. On the public or big issue side of the pendulum, the subject matter must capture a reader's attention. Baseball fans love biographies of players such as Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, and Ty Cobb. Men read and are often obsessed with military history—World War II, especially. These books stay in print and are referred to in the publishing world as backlist books, meaning they're perennial sellers; there's no need to promote these titles. The subjects sell themselves, not a lot of copies, perhaps, but enough to keep making a profit.

The memoir, on the opposite side of the pendulum, has its own draw—an unusual and compelling personal story—and will also show up in the backlist catalog. *The Kiss*, *The Liars Club*, and others like them will be available for a long time because of their unique stories, their intimate revelations, and of course the fine writing. Both sides of the pendulum can be successful.

The ideal creative nonfiction piece is one where the pendulum stops somewhere around the middle—a public subject with an intimate and personal spin. Writers who can choose a public subject and give it a personal treatment are establishing a “universal chord”: reaching out and embracing

a large umbrella of readership. People from Iowa to Israel and from New York to Indonesia are equally intrigued by such a book. That's the writer's mission: to establish and stretch his potential reading audience.

"Difficult Decisions" and "Fixing Nemo" are public issue/idea pieces. Many writers can profile veterinarians, whether they specialize in goats or goldfish. At its bare bones, even Lauren Slater's "Three Spheres" is a public topic. The essay illustrates how therapists and therapy teams deal with patients and admit them to the proper therapeutic facility. It's also about how borderline personality patients act, and how professionals and treatment teams deal with borderline patients.

"Three Spheres" demonstrates the way writers can modify their distance from the subject and merge dual voices. Slater is not only the therapist and the writer, but she's also been a patient. She is "inside" and "outside" simultaneously.

Another way of achieving this inside and outside middle ground—public and personal—is demonstrated in Susan Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning

EXERCISE 5

For the first few exercises, I asked you to choose a personal experience and dramatize it—and then connect the story to something of substance you can talk about and create a dialogue or amplify. Perhaps you have already begun an essay that represents a big idea—a public issue—and the piece you are writing contains that elusive and essential universal chord. If not, then it's time to think more seriously about the direction of your essay and how you can make it more relevant to a larger audience from a substance point of view.

Or better yet—and this is what I prefer—start a second essay—a big idea piece of writing—about something that is very important to you. What turns you on—or off? Politics, food, French wine, sustainability, or big time college sports? What do you want to learn more about—or talk about? How would you like to change the world? Make a list and start to learn everything you can about the subject. Research is often the best way to begin.

Is There No Place on Earth for Me? (1982), first excerpted in the *New Yorker*. The narrative revolves around a schizophrenic patient, Sylvia Frumkin, who, like Slater's patient, is being admitted to a psychiatric facility and discussing the treatment options available to her under the New York state system. Sheehan is a reporter who documented the tragic and sometimes ridiculous details of Frumkin's life.

The book opens with a vivid scene as Frumkin is taking a bath. Sheehan tells us she's washing her brown hair with a combination of shampoo and red mouthwash. At some point in her past, Frumkin had dyed her hair red and liked the way she looked, but became impatient with the coloring process. That morning she concluded that the mouthwash would seep into her scalp and make her hair red forever.

Sheehan describes Frumkin's "frolicking" in the bathtub, blowing bubbles and making a soapy mess on the floor, which causes her to slip and fall and get a cut on the back of her head. She wraps a towel around her head and stumbles into her bedroom where, on her dresser, she sees the bottle of expensive perfume a relative had recently given her for her thirtieth birthday. "She poured the contents of the bottle on her cut," Sheehan writes, "partly because she knew that her perfume contained alcohol and that alcohol was an antiseptic and partly because she suddenly thought that she was Jesus Christ and that her cut was the beginning of a crown of thorns. She also thought that she was Mary Magdalene, who had poured ointment on Christ."

Although the stories by Slater and Sheehan differ in content, the disjointed memories and experiences of Slater as a patient and of Frumkin evoke similar feelings of chaotic disturbance. They could be the same person. Or, stretching it a little, Frumkin could have been the person the young Slater would have grown up to be had circumstances been different. This is a testament to Sheehan's research, her ability to connect with her subjects, and her willingness to devote enough time and attention to understand the issues and ideas in a three-dimensional sense. She's building into the book and her story a universal chord, meaning that she's talking about real issues that concern our country generally and the health care system specifically—a big idea—and personalizing it so that readers can understand and relate in a vivid and unforgettable manner.

Widening the Pendulum's Swing

You can maximize your reading audience and strike a universal chord through research. Or to use a word journalists prefer: reporting. Your story might be too local—too much about your hometown or your neighborhood—to connect with folks who live in Nebraska or Oklahoma or an urban subculture like Boston or New York. Or too personal—about close friends and family, people your readers might not identify with.

To broaden substance and enhance readership, some writers reach back and make historical connections. John Edgar Widemann is the author of “Looking at Emmett Till,” in *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction* (2003). The essay is about the Ku Klux Klan’s 1965 murder of teenager Emmett Till in tiny Money, Mississippi. Wideman makes it clear this wasn’t an isolated incident; it was a blight upon our nation. He provides many other examples of white hate crimes against blacks in the 1960s and into the present day.

“It was hard to bury Emmett Till,” he writes, “hard, hard to bury Carole Robinson, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, the four girls killed by a bomb in a Birmingham, Alabama, church. So hard that an entire nation began to register the convulsions of black mourning.” He continued: “Emmett Till’s mangled face could belong to anybody’s son who transgressed racial laws; anyone’s little girl could be crushed in the rubble of a bombed church. . . . Martin Luther King understood the killing of our children was an effort to murder the nation’s future.”

In her memoir "Yellow Taxi," published in a collected volume I recently edited, *At the End of Life: True Stories About How We Die* (2012), Eve Joseph, a hospice counselor, writes: "When I was twelve, my older brother was killed in a car accident. It was 1965, the year Allen Ginsburg introduced the term *flower power*, and Malcolm X was shot dead inside Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, the year T.S. Elliot died and Bob Dylan's 'Like a Rolling Stone' was on its way to becoming a new anthem" (see the entire essay on page 169).

These historical extensions connect readers with memories of their own experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, or perhaps with their own relationships with minority groups—incidents that may be dangerous or embarrassing. Jews weren't lynched or murdered for being Jews in this country in 1955, but anti-Semitism was still common enough to frighten them; Japanese Americans felt simmering resentment over the discrimination and internment they experienced during World War II. And thus, even though these groups might not have been persecuted in the overt way African Americans were, they can nonetheless empathize with Wideman's words. And few baby boomers do not have poignant and often gloriously nostalgic memories of Ginsberg and Dylan, making Eve Joseph's reminiscent line hit home.

Including history, when appropriate and relevant, is one way to expand your base audience; so too is adding fascinating ancillary information as texture, to make the facts of whatever you're describing more evocative. Later in "Yellow Taxi" Joseph writes: "At birth a newborn baby has approximately three hundred bones while on the average an adult has two hundred six. Our bones fuse as we grow. We are building our scaffolding without even knowing it. The twenty-four long curved bones of our ribcage form a structure that shelters the heart, lungs, liver and spleen. Like exotic birds, we live within the shelter of our bony cages."

She continues to connect her information to her story: "One summer night, a twenty-eight-year-old patient with bone cancer asked to be wheeled outside in her hospital bed to sleep beneath the stars. In the days preceding her death, the bones in her ribcage were so brittle that one or two broke whenever she rolled over. I was horrified to learn that our bones could snap like dry twigs."

If you're writing about geography or travel, information about location can add substance and allow you to connect to more readers. From my book *Truckin' with Sam* (2010), here's an interesting factoid I found on Google: "We follow the interstate past Fargo to Jamestown, North Dakota, then eventually connect to US 52, which takes us to Portal. North Portal, a sister city, is just over the Canadian border in Saskatchewan. Some time later, I googled Portal and learned that the town is known for its international golf course, the only course in the world in two countries, with the first eight holes in Canada and the final hole in both countries. You tee off in Canada and your ball crosses the 49th parallel and, because of the changing time zones, lands in Portal, North Dakota—an hour later."

Even if you're describing something you know a lot about, it's good to bring in other viewpoints—not only to broaden the topic but also to enhance your own credibility, as Eve Joseph does by invoking a preeminent expert:

In 1969, with her book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross brought the subject of death out of the privacy of medical schools and delivered it to the streets. She gave the layperson a language and a framework to understand the process of grief. Her five stages of grief provided new ways to think and speak about loss and helped give a sense of movement to the dying process. Her model is largely responsible for the ubiquitous idea of the "good death," the idea that there is a best way to approach the end of life, that we will reach acceptance before our last breath. A central concept of a good death is one that allows a person to die on his or her own terms, relatively pain free, with dignity. As if we have control. I was regularly asked, by family members, to describe the dying process. I would tell them about how people often lapse into a coma in the days preceding death and how breath moves from the deep and regular to the shallow and intermittent. I would explain apnea and how many people hold their breath for long periods of time, up to three minutes sometimes, and how all others in the room also hold their breath until the gasping breath breaks the silence in the room. I would explain

that people rarely die in the space between breaths, that they return to the body as if they have been on a practice run. I would go over the possibility that phlegm would build up, resulting in what is known as a "death rattle," a term that invokes a kind of dread, a term that conjures up scenes like the one Dostoevsky described in *Crime and Punishment*: "She sank more and more into uneasy delirium. At times she shuddered, turned her eyes from side to side, recognized everyone for a minute, but at once sank into delirium again. Her breathing was hoarse and difficult; there was a sort of rattle in her throat." I would talk about how the hands and feet get cold as blood leaves the extremities and pools around the heart and lungs in a last attempt to protect the vital organs and how those hands and feet turn blue shortly before death. And I would talk about how breath leaves the body, how it moves from the chest to the throat to little fish breaths at the end.

Note how Eve Joseph connects her ideas and experiences with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, thus enhancing her own credibility. This sort of information—quoting from an expert—is what is expected in a public story, but the pieces quoted here are from memoir or personal essay. This is an important point. By adding research/reportage *even to memoir* we are pushing the pendulum closer to the middle in order to reach more readers and make our own personal story more encompassing.

The memoirist doesn't lose story or intimacy by adding research. On the contrary, research information makes the work more three dimensional and powerful. It's also part of the package. Remember, the term "creative nonfiction" includes two words—and writers sometimes become so obsessed with the first that they forget the second. Combining research and story creates connective tissue and forges the universal chord that we are all seeking in order to reach out to the reader on all levels and maximize our audience.