

Q&A with Myrna Kostash

1. How do you define Creative Nonfiction? And what is the “Creative” part about?

Many definitions abound – some are posted on the CNFC’s website and in your Message from Canada Writes. From the beginning of my professional writing in the genre in the late 1970s, when it was more commonly called the New Journalism, I have stuck by the simple definition that it involves the application of literary techniques (what Andreas Schroeder calls our ‘toolbox’) to documentary materials. So the “creative” is implicit in that definition. Nevertheless, it gets us into a lot of trouble when writers assume “creative” includes “making things up.” Some of us are hard-line about this, especially writers rooted in reportage or journalism. Others, like myself, are more lenient as long as the writer signals to the reader what is going on. That’s the “contract” you sign up for. None of this would be such a bother if we weren’t saddled with that ridiculous “non” in front of “fiction”: I don’t know of another literary culture that defines this genre as a negative. (In French they refer to it by what it *does*: *essai* and *récit*. Even then they need two words: it’s a capacious genre). So thank you for leaving out the hyphen: the single-word “nonfiction” is a genre in its own right.

2. What is it about the genre that compels you as a writer?

Like every other aspiring Canadian writer I knew of at the time (the 1970s) I thought a writer was a person who wrote novels. Otherwise one was a poet, a playwright or a newspaper reporter. Yet all along I was reading *Rolling Stone*, *Ramparts*, and *Esquire* magazines – for their politics – subconsciously absorbing an astonishingly energetic and innovative (it seemed at the time) style of journalism that included, provocatively, a narrator’s point of view, dramatic structures, dialogue and what the granddaddy of it all, Tom Wolfe, calls “immersion.” I had no luck with the short stories I was sending out, but my very first piece of New Journalism aka creative nonfiction in which I decried - in a style a friend called “full-tilt boogie journalism” - the Canadian fixation on American radicalism instead of our own was published by *Saturday Night* magazine in Toronto. (Under Robert Fulford, the magazine kept on publishing me and other New Journalists for quite awhile.) I had found my voice and I never wrote fiction again. Creative nonfiction continues to be the genre which so forcibly combines my passion to understand my times with the invitation to link it with my interior life. That’s why I think that creative nonfiction is actually closely related to lyric and narrative poetry: they both offer acute observation and reflection.

3. In your opinion, what makes for “good” Creative Nonfiction?

I’ve gone back and forth on this. Awhile ago, when it seemed the memoir and first-person narrative forms were swamping the genre, I issued a Manifesto calling for a return to the genre’s roots in reportage. This was a way of reminding creative nonfiction writers that it’s called “nonfiction” for a reason: the genre begins in the world outside the writer, in curiosity, research and interviews, sleuthing, note-taking, etc. And only after that essential work has been done does the writing process open up to the writer’s personal ‘toolbox,’ of memory, reflection, bias, dream. I then reversed myself when, in dismay at a few seasons of the top nonfiction *literary* awards going to strict if well-written journalism with few if any literary pretensions, I called for

a campaign to revive the importance of those other forms of “good” nonfiction: the memoir, the long form narrative, the essay, the experimental cross-genre writing that Canada Council juries don’t know what to do with but which creative nonfiction readily encompasses. Currently, I prefer to use the term *literary* nonfiction for forms that include the New Journalism and the memoir and reserve *creative* nonfiction for the edgier stuff that doesn’t fit anywhere else. Interestingly, a survey that the CNFC conducted concerning the use of the term “creative nonfiction” found that it is mainly in use in writing programs and competitions while the industry (agents, booksellers, publishers) shy away from it. (The survey results are posted on the CNFC’s website.)

4. You are a founding member of the Creative Nonfiction Collective and the current President. What brought about its creation? How did you become involved?

Vancouver writer Betsy Warland and I co-founded the CNFC in 2004 at a conference in Banff in response to what we perceived to be a crisis in the genre at the time. I was dissatisfied with the paucity of awards given to nonfiction, with the relative lack of interest in the media to cover even prize-winning nonfiction, especially Canadian, with the resulting resounding silence of important subject matter that nonfiction offers, and with the absence of the genre from creative writing programs. Betsy was frustrated by the rigid definitions confining the genre. We invited writers of nonfiction (self-defining as “creative”) to pay their own way to Banff and opened our 2-day conference with a Cabaret of short readings by participants, a mind-blowing experience we still talk about: even we as practitioners had no idea of the breadth and depth of possibilities in the genre. Founding members included Andreas Schroeder, Maggie Siggins, Ken McGoogan, Ted Bishop, Lynne van Luven, Lynn Bowen, George Melnyk, Trevor Boddy and Caterina Edwards.

5. Tell us more about The Creative Nonfiction Collective? What does being part of the CNFC do for writers?

For a very modest membership fee, members have the right to attend our annual conference (usually in Banff), which is our main activity. Besides the evening of Cabaret and a Reader’s Choice Award presented to a writer whose work deserves wider recognition, the conference features a Keynote speaker (in the past, Erna Paris, Charlie Foran, Mark Abley, Heather Robertson among others), this year Karen Connelly, and includes craft and issue-oriented panels and seminars. Not to mention wining and dining. Members’ websites are linked to our home page. From time to time members organize local nonfiction cabarets (we had a wildly successful one in Toronto in 2011). Anyone can join our list-serv and post on our Facebook page. In other words, the Collective provides opportunities for professionals and those entering the genre to network, exchange knowledge and expertise, rant and rave.

6. What are the challenges of writing Creative Nonfiction?

These days the challenges are shared across the board with all literary genres in Canada: shrinking markets especially for long-form magazine features, the “unmonetized” e-world of reading (and the assault on creator’s copyright), and the globalization (read, uber-corporatization) of publishing. Specifically, nonfiction of all kinds often requires substantial financial support even before the writing begins – research time, travel – rarely covered by

advances and grants. The production of nonfiction is hugely subsidized by the writers themselves.

7. You've written both fiction and creative nonfiction. How does the writing process differ between the two?

I don't write fiction, at least not deliberately! I have pushed the boundaries of creative nonfiction, however, in some of my edgier work, where I do in fact *make things up*. Lately, I have made the transition to "fiction" in the writing of a stageplay that began with items on the historical record (the so-called Frog Lake Massacre of 1885) but has been forcibly moved into the realm of pure imaginative story-telling because of the demands of drama. This has been the hardest work of my writing life because it is without boundaries. This is both exhilarating – "you mean it doesn't have to be *true*?" – and terrifying: characters, dialogues and scenes have the potential to fly off in all directions. As a result, I am in awe of writers of big fictions, of entire parallel universes to the one we nonfiction writers are *ipso facto* handed on a plate.

8. What are the things that Creative Nonfiction can achieve that fiction cannot?

To judge from the reactions of audiences at Edmonton's Lit Fest (the only literary festival in the world dedicated exclusively to nonfiction), the genre is prized and loved for its engagement with the real world, from whatever angle. There is something deeply satisfying about accounts of realities we share as citizens of given communities.

9. How are Creative Nonfiction writers currently doing in Canada?

Compared to the "crisis" bemoaned in 2004, the genre and some writers are doing very well these days. There are now just as many and lucrative prizes for the genre as for fiction and poetry, the winners receive more attention from festivals, more and more literary programs and journals offer creative nonfiction on their menus, and the term has wide currency (although bookstores don't know what to do with it except shelve it according to subject matter). Troubling, however, is the cult of celebrity that, as with the Giller and Griffin prizes for novels and poetry respectively, means that if you're not even on a short list you get short shrift by publicists, media hosts and reviewers. I would add too that with the popularity of the term "creative nonfiction," meaning memoir, writers and readers may be unaware that the genre of "literary nonfiction" includes a very wide range of nonfiction from – just to cite some recent short-listed titles – accounts of early assaults on Mount Everest to personal narratives of geography and history to graphic memoirs of family traumas.

10. Name three Canadian Creative Nonfiction writers who should be more widely read than they are. Why did you choose these three?

Excluding current members of the Board of CNFC:

Joan Skogan for *Voyages: At Sea with Strangers* and *Mary of Canada*; although not currently published, Skogan has written some of the most heart-stopping language of the observed world and its interior reverberations.

Marusya Bociurkiw for *Comfort Food for Breakups: The Memoir of a Hungry Girl*; Bociurkiw has interwoven recipes, family secrets, confession and editorial in a combination the genre was invented for, maybe especially for Queer Ukrainian-Canadians.

Sarah Murphy for works – e.g. *Last Taxi to Nutmeg Mews* - that make a disturbing and revelatory mishmash of fiction, memoir, essay, intermedia and spoken word “performance monologues,” and that demonstrate the need for the term creative nonfiction to juggle it all.

Myrna Kostash
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