

Quill & Quire

For years I championed the cause of creative nonfiction whenever I could. My point was that, thanks to the New Journalism, nonfiction now had a whole new rhetorical and formal repertoire that should be recognized as something other than “mere” journalism. Call it creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, literary journalism, creative documentary, whatever, the point was that, since the literary establishment turned its nose up at nonfiction as unliterary, then, dammit, we would not be “just” nonfiction writers but *creative* nonfiction writers who had every right to be treated as equal to fiction writers and poets in the creation of Canadian literature.

I am seriously reconsidering this argument.

In 1978, as a brand-new author of a nonfiction book, I joined The Writers Union of Canada. To say I was shocked to hear the serious discussion still going on among its members whether nonfiction writers had a right to be members of TWUC at all would be an understatement. I was offended, hurt and defensive all at once.

Nonfiction writers weren't “literary,” you see, and, besides, we made pots of money.

Never mind that nonfiction projects were ineligible for Canada Council artists' grants and nonfiction writers excluded from the Canada Council readings and writer-in-residence programs. Never mind that we weren't welcome at any number of literary festivals, most notoriously at the Harbourfront International Festival, except if we wrote literary biographies or were non-Canadian, and that the juries that gave out nonfiction prizes were overwhelmingly composed of academics. And, if you wanted to learn how to write the stuff, you were directed to journalism schools, or to the myriad creative writing programs in the USA which unashamedly offered programs in “creative nonfiction” or “literary journalism,” or even just unadorned “nonfiction.”

So we persisted in promoting our genre as creative nonfiction, the term that finally won out over the others, thanks mainly to standard American usage (although that “non” always brought to mind Dorothy Parker's quip: “I don't write non-anything”). It was a matter of self-defense, really, given the sheer *canonicity* of the novel in discussion about the flourishing of writing in Canada. It was the *novel* that was the toast of the national and then international literary circuit while we nonfiction writers were left to believe that we toiled in the unprestigious backwaters of the *non-imaginative*, also known as reality.

Two years ago, I circulated a *cri de coeur*: “Writing Canadian nonfiction in the 21st century: is there a crisis?” Much of my angst was fuelled by the frustrating experience of having served on a Governor-General's jury for nonfiction and then

watching the fine publisher of nonfiction, Macfarlane Walter & Ross, who had published our winner, Andrew Nikiforuk, go out of business. And I was much affected at the time by the pointed comments *National Post* columnist Noah Richler made, in November 2002, in the splashy wake of the big fiction prizes (“Enough about fiction, already”), about the “proliferation” of literary fiction and of literary celebrities “singing the landscape,” about a “surplus of accreditation and often mediocre criticism” and prizes sponsored by “business interests” that nevertheless encouraged every stage of production of fiction and “even the most ordinary writer of fiction.”

Richler compared this luxurious situation to that of Canadian nonfiction, about which Ian Jack, the editor of the celebrated journal of international nonfiction, *Granta*, confessed to him: Well, he’d like to publish a Canadian issue “but the problem was that there were so few good writers of contemporary nonfiction in Canada. Why was that, by the way?” Partly, Richler, thought, his ignorance had to do with the public’s and industry’s fixation on fiction whose writers could only serve us “dollops” of our history, painlessly swallowed. (“I read for escape!” as so many readers will tell you).

The good news since about Canadian nonfiction as reported by my colleagues elsewhere in these pages has reminded me that we seem to have come a long way, babies. Writing programs have opened up to nonfiction (well, “narrative prose” anyway), substantial prizes are distributed to its writers, literary journals regularly feature “creative nonfiction,” the new regime at Harbourfront promises more fuss about nonfiction, and, best of all, young writers have energetically entered the genre. Book publishers are once again pursuing literary nonfiction manuscripts, the reading public does seem to be interested in documentaries about its own time and place, *Walrus* and *Maisonneuve* and *Toro* magazines, even the venerable *Saturday Night*, are providing the seedbed for our future writers of nonfiction books, and *Granta* may one day be convinced of our literary maturity as purveyors of nonfiction as well as of fiction.

And I mean “nonfiction,” without any qualification or tarring up. I have now arrived at the position where I think “creative nonfiction” is an over-used term for writing that is essentially narrative prose (magazine writers have been writing the stuff for generations), and when we use it we exhibit the “cultural cringe” of nonfiction writers who are ashamed their roots are showing.

In 1993, while holidaying in Montana, I dropped in on Bill Kittredge in Missoula, who had been teaching creative writing since 1969. He said his best students were writing nonfiction and were not even “vaguely interested” in writing fiction. “Everyone’s tired of the smaller-than-life, ironic, low mimetic narrator in fiction. In nonfiction it’s fun to be able to write as a narrator who is as smart as you can be. But I always tell my students that the most important thing to figure out is *what your subject is going to be.*”

And you find your subject, it seems to me, by doing a reporter's job. This is what Tom Wolfe reminded us in his 1989 manifesto issued in *Harper's* magazine in which he deplored the belief of young fiction writers that the act of writing words on the page was the "real thing" while the real world is merely "so-called" - or "constructed." He argued then that it has fallen on nonfiction to exploit the "most valuable and least understood resource" available to a writer: documentation, or what Wolfe calls "reporting." (Then he went on to write novels!)

Or, as Brian Fawcett extended the argument to creative nonfiction (in a *Dooney's Café* posting March 2004), "Its specialist posture seems to suppose that it can establish empirically-sound factualities and coding even while it claims that its verity lies in the realm of creative imagination. Thus, it pretends to objectivity while using creativity to shelter it from the rules of discourse and evidence. I don't think writers can or should have this both ways."

Otherwise, we run the risk that so much fiction runs - narcissism - and present a writing self "untaxed by history," to quote someone at the recent AWP [Association of Writers and Writing Programs] conference in Vancouver.

Alexander Wolcott once wrote excoriatingly, in *Vanity Fair*, October 1997, about the vogue in memoir, of "dogged" monologues "piddling away" into pointless "passive-aggressive chat." In defence of the memoir, Elizabeth Renzetti of the *Globe & Mail* suggested that it is the "one place in non-fiction where the general reader can find important ideas discussed without being bogged down in the painful jargon of the professional philosopher, psychologist or literary critic." The *one* place? I find this a bizarre claim, given the wealth of general nonfiction, literary and journalistic, written in this country about philosophy (Mark Kingwell), economics (Linda McQuaig), information technology (Heather Menzies), queer culture (Stan Persky), art history (Susan Crean), historical trauma (Erna Paris), urban ecologies (Brain Fawcett)...I could go on. I've written some of it myself. All of this is writing deeply "connected" to the world outside ourselves as well as resonant with the writer's voice. It is, I believe, what Wolcott would have us write: "civic journalism for the soul."

In April 2004 a group of western Canadian nonfiction writers gathered in Banff and drafted a "Banff Declaration," which was subsequently quietly retired because of lack of consensus on its content but which nevertheless did make some unexceptionable points. "We believe," it began, "that nonfiction is the intellectual lifeblood of public imagination and discourse" and that the "vitality" of Canadian literary life must be measured by the state of its nonfiction as well as of fiction and poetry. "We note with alarm," it went on, the diminishment of the public space for debate and inquiry as a consequence of "media convergence" and loss of opportunities in local publishing markets.

With the shrinking of such public forums, I would argue, whether public affairs trade magazines or Book Sections of newspapers or prime time literary programs

on radio and tv that should take as lively an interest in Canadian nonfiction as fiction, we risk losing the vital role that nonfiction writers play - lobbing arguments into the public square. (Nonfiction, wrote Noah Richler, is the way society argues with itself.) If readers would rather be arguing about the one *novel* that “everybody” should be reading, or choosing their reading material from bestseller lists driven by publishing conglomerates, or relaxing with those “dollops of history,” what does this say about the level of public discourse in Canada? CBC Radio has just announced a 10-week series of *Ideas* programs, hosted by the same Noah Richler, “A Literary Atlas of Canada,” which intends to “explore the stories that bind the country together in conversation with “some of Canada’s best writers” in French and English. There are 71 of them and they are all novelists and poets (Ronald Wright and Sharon Butala are partial exceptions). Is there an Arts producer in the house who will dare to put nonfiction writers on that map? I’m talking about writers whose primary or only expression is in nonfiction.

It was at the AWP conference that I heard two *doyens* of nonfiction in the US square off against each other. In the one corner, Lee Gutkind, writer and editor of numerous “how to” volumes of creative nonfiction, in the other, essayist and anthologist Phillip Lopate. After Gutkind’s exuberant pitch for the genre – “two stories in play, the public and private, framed in narrative” – Lopate pronounced total disagreement. Lopate is drawn to the personal essay precisely because it requires a reflective voice, not the “invasive techniques of fiction and poetry that have marginalized the legitimate genre of the essay.” Lopate likes to think “on the page”: it’s not just “what happened” that is important - the narrative impulse – but reflecting on what happened.

I mull this over as I now read of the “story-driven” nonfiction that is attracting young writers. And I think about the editor of *Granta*, who has introduced a collection of nonfiction that includes the luminous and mind-bending work of such literary masters as Ryszard Kapuscinski, Carolyn Forché and James Fenton, and has called it *The Granta Book of Reportage*.

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