

SAGE HILL KEYNOTE LECTURE

First I was a magazine writer in Toronto in the early 1970s, given permission by the *New Journalism* that I was reading - in **Rolling Stone** and **The Village Voice** - to speak with my own voice. So much for the journalistic rule of “objectivity.”

This seems an odd thing to say about journalism. Isn't objectivity - detachment, non-involvement, suspension of judgement - the *nec plus ultra* of truthfulness? But we know from science, to take the most “objective” pursuit, that the observer is not safely separated from the world sitting out there but is part of a “web of relations” with the environment as soon as we train an eye on it. Just by being there, having a look, we have acted on and altered the object of our gaze.

In the words of John Wheeler, an atomic physicist, “the discoveries of modern physics mean that in some strange sense the universe is a participatory universe.”

A participatory universe. This is also what the New Journalism acknowledged. That the writer has an intimate relationship with her material, and is alive, conscious and with a *point of view*.

There is an “I,” a subject, a creature with her own prejudices, passions and anxieties who is gathering the news. She is present, so to speak, at the scene she is describing. She doesn't try to hide. She isn't anonymous. The British writer James Fenton discovered this for himself while travelling in Korea and Vietnam; he was amazed to see how the constrictions of “objective” journalism meant that most journalists were jettisoning their best material “because they know they will not be able to write it up, because to do so would imply *they had been present at the events they had been describing*. And not only present - live, conscious and with a point of view.”

So, I was a New Journalist. I was also a brand-new feminist. And I want to say something here about the importance of the one to the other.

In the sense that objectivity was “about” control, non-commitment, evasion, it was anathema to feminism. If these were virtues, they seemed pretty masculine to us. We wanted to break through the anonymity and facelessness to which we had been historically consigned, we wanted a voice, we wanted agitation and judgement.

Historically speaking, we were very recent subjects. And so we were equally wary of the angst of the guilt-ridden, burned-out and fuse-blown liberal male writer who announced, and still announces periodically, that the personal is *dépassé*. Surveying the scorched landscape of his own privileged activity, in a crisis of conscience, he advises writers to shut up about themselves and get on with the really important stuff: deficit reduction, technology, war, what have you. This is dangerous to women, and others who have just begun to speak up for themselves.

New Journalism gave us permission to speak, and to speak for ourselves. And we discovered that what we were already good at - observing detail and subtly and tone, understanding the importance of the gesture, the half-spoken, the glance and being able to decipher them, being comfortable with intimacy, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary - were precisely what the New Journalism was interested in too.

Or what the godfather of the genre in our time, Tom Wolfe, defined as the Basic Techniques: Immersion; scene-by-scene construction; dialogue; and the “controlled trance.” “I would close my eyes and try to imagine myself into the scene, going crazy for example. How it feels and what it’s going to sound like if you translate it into words.” Other New Journalists, and after them the creative non-fictioneers, have ransacked other of fiction’s and poetry’s tools: dramatic structure, characterization, interior monologue, heightened language, and so on.

Well, that’s the “new” part of New Journalism. What about the “journalism” part?

In 1993 while holidaying in Montana, I dropped in on Bill Kittredge in Missoula. Since 1969 Kittredge has been teaching creative writing at the University of Montana and we had a chat about that, about how his best students are writing non-fiction and are not even “vaguely interested” in writing fiction. I wondered why that was the case. “They have a political agenda” - a subject - “and if you’re a writer who doesn’t then you’re all wrong, or lying. Everyone’s tired of the smaller-than-life, ironic, low mimetic narrator in fiction. In non-fiction 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 this brings us around to the roots of all creative non-fiction, what Tom Wolfe always is there to remind us of: **reporting**. In a 1989 issue of *Harper’s* magazine Wolfe issued a literary manifesto “for the new social novel,” 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 argues that it has fallen on non-fiction to exploit the “most valuable and least understood resource” available to a writer: documentation, or what Wolfe calls “reporting.”

Documentation, that is, of the world beyond the private self. The authority and urgency of the actual world, of the lives of others, and of public affairs as they shape our lives, remain the point of departure of non-fiction. Reporting reminds us that the writer does not arrive alone to the blank page but in the company of ancestors, comrades and neighbours and her conversation with them. *Creative* non-fiction has refined this task by proposing the essential link or bridge between this external world and the narrator. It is the genre, together with poetry, that draws the writer and reader together in a shared experience.

I have always been moved by American poet Terrence Des Pres’s encouragement to

us, as quoted in a reminiscence published in *The Hungry Mind Review* in 1988, that “if some part of the world hits home, we are right to expect a connection between the external event and an interior drama, a timeless, dreamlike tension trailing back into the mystery of the self.” This privileging of the external, the not-I, and its provocation of the psychic is what Annie Dilliard, the American essayist, has called the moment of “your own astonishment.” Such a moment has never been recorded before because it has never happened before, until now when the writer has been moved by some event or object in the actual world. “You find something interesting, for a reason hard to explain because you have never read it on any page. There you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.”

The world “out there” is where we always begin, curious and enquiring, rescuing the self from the perils of modern consciousness: atomization, amnesia and solipsism. In other words, creative non-fiction originates in the *context* of the personal, wishing neither to be at all times the objective, detached and controlling observer nor the writer for whom everything is subjective, nothing is predictable or generalizable. Writing in *The Loft* newsletter in Minneapolis the American creative non-fiction writer described the subject of her work as “not so much what happened as what we *know* because of what happened.” The Quebecois poet Paul Chamberland, loving what he calls the “civic poets,” refers to their “jubilation and play” on the one hand and their “responsibility to the other and connection with the collective.”

What all these writers speak to is the dream of creative wholeness - that in the act of writing we rejoin the separated halves of ourselves, the self who dreams and the self who is astonished, the self apart and the self in community. Some critics of polarized these selves as though they were the separated right and left brain of our consciousness - in which case I propose creative non-fiction - or what perhaps we should just start referring to as **cross-genre writing** - as the nerve centre that keeps the two brains in communication.

Well, this is the idealized creative non-fiction. But the creative non-fiction of the real world is experiencing a couple of crises which, interestingly, may be seen to have their roots in some eighteenth century prose in London, specifically in Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*. “What?” I hear you exclaim. “I thought you said the roots lay in the New Journalism of the 1960s?” They do, but there was a fascinating precursor of literary hybridity in a text whose full title is: *A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials Of the Most Remarkable Occurrences, As Well Public as Private, Which Happened in London During the Last Great Visitation in 1665.*” It even has a subtitle: *Written By a Citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made public before.*” Well, of course not. The “citizen” had just finished writing it - in 1722. Defoe wrote his “novel” from childhood reminiscence, tales told by his parents and neighbours, medical references, public records, contemporary witness accounts and other verifiable sources: what we’d call reporting. And then he invents an “I” who narrates the whole thing as though this creative alter ego had been present at the events described. Is this fiction, journalism or something in between? Here is Anthony

Burgess on the subject:

There are people who still find Defoe hard to take as a novelist and this because they have become accustomed to regarding the novel as a form almost aggressively 'literary' full of barely-concealed machinery and self-conscious fine writing....Defoe was our first great novelist because he was our first great journalist and he was our first great journalist because he was born not into literature but into life. [from his preface]

So identity crisis is endemic to the genre, and Burgess puts his finger on a current version of it, namely: What are the limits of creative non-fiction?

The genre, because of its roots in journalism, has always insisted on the integrity of its documentary purpose, succinctly phrased as: I don't make anything up. The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer, James Wood, said of a creative non-fiction by Julian Barnes that the genre "reshuffles reality's hand but does not invent a new game." Up until very recently, we have all insisted on this, some of us even turning necessity into a virtue. Not only is the genre *by definition* about facts and actuality, facts themselves are deemed to be more "compelling" than fiction, as Canadian writer George Galt argued, after judging a creative non-fiction competition for *Event* magazine. Nevertheless, he admitted, invention has been "migrating" into non-fiction from fiction and the time had come for non-fiction writers to agree on the "ground rules" of their genre for the innocent reader. The "scope" of literary non-fiction, writes Galt, is "what you have seen (or read), what you have heard, what you have tasted, touched and smelled" - not much room there for the imagination! The reader has the right to trust the writer to tell only of that which has existed "outside the writer's imagination." And when the non-fiction writer makes use of overtly literary devices such as dramatic structure, shifting point of view, dialogue, stream of consciousness, the reader has the right to be alerted to these encroachments of the imagined.

That creative non-fiction writers do make things up became an issue with the publication in 1996 of Marilyn Simonds' *The Convict Lover*, short-listed that year for the Governor-General's Award for Non-fiction. Even though she freely enters the minds of her historical characters to imagine what is going on in there, Simonds has always stoutly defended her work as documentary because she has not imagined anything that isn't implicit in the documentation. (This prompted me to suggest that there may be yet another sub-category of non-fiction: speculative non-fiction.) But what is really at issue here is that, in *The Convict Lover*, the narrator, i.e. Simonds, has disappeared altogether, leaving the reader with no signpost to signal clearly where the writer has slipped into "making things up." This makes some of us deeply uneasy. For it may be, as Janet Malcolm, the American non-fiction writer, has suggested, that it is actually fiction that is the "dependable" or truthful genre - in the sense that, within its own imagined world everything is "true" in a fiction - while in non-fiction "we almost never get the truth. Only in non-fiction does the question of what happened and how people felt and thought remain open."

The second crisis of the genre is what I call the limits of the “I.” Having been given permission to speak for ourselves, are we in danger of never shutting up? And has the narrator now become more important than her material? There is much anxious discussion of this in the chattering classes. In an essay in the *New Yorker’s* fiction issue in 1996, fiction editor Bill Buford listed examples of the “new” literary non-fiction - growing up with a wacko mother, growing up without a wacko father, being just plain wacko - which raises the question why anyone should care about someone else’s wackiness. Buford defended these narratives as good old-fashioned story-telling, and certainly everyone enjoys a good yarn. But in a genre that purports to be about actuality, the real world has shrunk alarmingly to the proportions of the narrator’s personal history. The *Globe & Mail’s* Elizabeth Renzetti last weekend surveyed some of this Fall’s bumper crop of Canadian memoirs - and its critics. The memoir is accused of being “therapy,” narcissistic “self-absorption,” confession and unsolicited intimacy. The old feminist adage that the personal is political has now reversed itself: the political has become personal. Looking inward, Renzetti cautions, seems to preclude writers looking outward to make connections. (This is the reason why I think that that old standby of advice to creative writing students, to write “what you know,” is potentially dangerous. Alexander Wolcott writes hilariously and excoriatingly in *Vanity Fair*, October 1997 about the current vogue in “crisis narratives,” of “dogged” monologues “piddling away” into pointless “passive-aggressive chat.)

But in defence of the memoir Renzetti suggests 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 non-fiction, 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), popular culture (Geoff Pevere)...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.”

I once conducted a creative non-fiction writing workshop in Banff in which a participant, a professional photographer, asked why anyone would be interested in his family pictures (we were discussing the variety of materials available to creative non-fiction.) Good question. Maybe *the* question. “Why are you telling/showing me this? Why should I care?” It’s the question that hangs at the end of every non-fiction writer’s foray into the personal. But it’s there to remind us that it is only when the first person pronoun is embedded in the political, historical, and social that we are launched into the wide world. And that it’s out there, in the world of others, where we encounter what every reader yearns for from the opening pages of a book: the stuff that is bigger than we are. We are agape with astonishment.