

Madeline Marquardt

Dianna Baldwin

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Cover Letter Regarding the Role of Truth in Creative Nonfiction

The purpose of this annotated bibliography is the inquiry into the role and importance of truth in creative nonfiction pieces. Most of this information was acquired through Michigan State University Libraries and databases Jstor and Proquest. Online news forums were also used.

Before the aspects of fact in creative nonfiction were examined, various sources were collected to define creative nonfiction as a genre. To do this, it was also necessary to examine what genres are not regarded as creative nonfiction and why they are not considered so. After such sources were found, research moved first to what psychological phenomena can cause legitimate error of memory, and what the motives behind intentionally creating false nonfiction may be. The next step in research was to investigate what untruths or factual errors are allowed in creative nonfiction, the rights of the reader to the truth, and then finally to work to establish some sort of genre-defining line between creative nonfiction and fiction.

A conclusion was reached that the qualifications for a piece to be creative nonfiction vary based on the intent of the author. Some fabricating of stories is necessary to make them readable and true to the atmosphere. Creative nonfiction is told through the bias and flawed mind of a human. If you were to remove all factual errors, all of the human components of the creative nonfiction pieces would also be removed, making the piece not altogether different from a passage from a history textbook. Therefore, the line between creative nonfiction and fiction is case specific.

Creative Nonfiction Annotated Bibliography

Almond, Steve. "The Heroic Lie: A Brief Inquiry into the Fake Memoir." *The Rumpus.net The Heroic Lie A Brief Inquiry into the Fake Memoir*. 20 Apr. 2011. Web. 31 Mar. 2015. <<http://therumpus.net/2011/04/the-heroic-lie-a-brief-inquiry-into-the-fake-memoir/>>.

This article focuses on the line between making up events we know did not happen and filling in details that we think we remember. The article points to the fact that a person giving a factual account based on their memory makes the genre of nonfiction highly subjective, and offers thorough examples, as well as in-depth analysis as to the reasons why people both consciously and subconsciously fabricate tales.

This source was very useful in understanding the issues of honesty in creative nonfiction, particularly memoir writing, and approached this issue in a fair manner. The author is the published novelist and essayist, and this piece is published through a literary blog. The article is fairly long, and structured atypically from the normal essay. It offers insight on the issue of the 'fake memoir'. The quality of the piece is strengthened by the citation of various instances and explanations as to why people have faked memoirs. The biggest justification used by the authors of these false memoirs seemed to be insecurity, and the notion that if the story was not fabricated, no one would listen. Also mentioned is subconscious alteration of memories, including a personal anecdote by the author about a childhood event that he remembers differently than his brother. While the idea of a

changing memory is touched on, the article could include much more in this area, as well as some of the scientific background regarding this phenomenon.

Greg, Bottoms. "Tutor Tips: Creative Writing." *Tutor Tips: Creative Writing*. UVM Writing Center. Web. 2 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.uvm.edu/wid/writingcenter/tutortips/nonfiction.html>>.

This article offers a background on the different types of creative writing. It defines the different categories of creative nonfiction, as well as the kind of content that creative nonfiction usually showcases. Towards the end of this article, detail is offered as to how one should go about composing their own creative nonfiction pieces, and various writing prompts are offered.

This article is intended as a tutorial on how to write a creative nonfiction piece, but is still a good starting place for learning about the different types of writing creative nonfiction includes. Lists are presented in a well-formatted manner, and are easy to understand.

Published through the Writing Center of the University of Vermont, this is a reliable source regarding the components of creative nonfiction. The article clarifies the general academic definition of creative nonfiction for the most part, but does not touch what is not considered creative nonfiction.

Gutkind, Lee. "What's the (Personal) Story #55." *Creative Nonfiction* 1.55 (2015). *Creative Nonfiction: True Stories, Well Told*. Web. 26 Mar. 2015.

<<https://www.creativenonfiction.org/node/4219>>.

What's the (Personal) Story #55 is a preface from the editor of the *Creative Nonfiction* journal explaining much of the negative criticisms that pieces of creative nonfiction face. "Exaggeration" and "Narcissism" are the two insults primarily flung, and are countered with the idea that the memoir is a snapshot of real life, interlaced with real feelings and ideas. They are a reflection of humanity, both the good and the bad, and the article claims they are an "integral part of the literary landscape".

This source is useful in acquiring a basic understanding of creative nonfiction, as well as in giving a brief background of creative nonfiction's development. The article is brief, and leaves a lot to be desired as far as depth goes. It references particular memoirs, journals and magazines in rapid succession and in a manner that is somewhat difficult to understand without knowing the history of the creative nonfiction field. However, as the piece is intended as an opening to a journal, it would be unrealistic to expect a full background or very much detail regarding creative nonfiction.

Julier, Laura, and Kathleen Livingston. "Editor's Note: On Readers, Triggers, Access and Accountability." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 6.2 (2014): V-Viii. *Jstor*.

Web. 5 Apr. 2015.

<[http://za2uf4ps7f.search.serialssolutions.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/?sid=jstor:jstor&genre=article&issn=15223868&eissn=15441733&volume=17&pages=v-viii&spage=v&epage=viii&atitle=Editor's Note&date=2015&title=Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction&issue=1](http://za2uf4ps7f.search.serialssolutions.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/?sid=jstor:jstor&genre=article&issn=15223868&eissn=15441733&volume=17&pages=v-viii&spage=v&epage=viii&atitle=Editor's%20Note&date=2015&title=Fourth%20Genre%20Explorations%20in%20Nonfiction&issue=1)>.

This article focuses most notably on the idea of trigger warnings in nonfiction, and their importance. A trigger warning is a sort of 'tag' to warn readers of any sensitive content in nonfiction pieces that could trigger unpleasant memories. The reason for trigger warnings as given by this article is that many nonfiction pieces published both in this journal and in other platforms do contain sensitive content, as sensitive content is inevitable in efforts to portray true to life situations. The idea behind these trigger warnings is that while these pieces are designed to make a reader feel something or to leave an impression, the reader can choose to protect themselves from certain types of content. The concept of accountability is integrated into the article around this point: if the journal is going to publish these sensitive pieces, then they owe it to their readers to inform them of such material.

This portion of the *Fourth Genre* journal is useful in indentifying the types of material often featured in creative nonfiction. One of the claims this article makes is the right of the reader to the truth. Whether applied to trigger warnings or to misreported information, this source demonstrates that the readers have a right to know the details of the information they consume, both so that they can monitor the information digested and to prevent their own misinformation. The subject of this piece in combination with the information given by other articles lends to the question of how accurate these retellings of various sensitive events can be.

Kotz, Deborah. "What Brian Williams Case May Teach About False Memories."

BostonGlobe.com. The Boston Globe, 13 Feb. 2015. Web. 08 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/health->

wellness/2015/02/13/health/cL3iQRCl2hrkOk4fts8NhI/story.html>.

This piece discusses the popular controversy regarding misreporting of the journalist Brian Williams. It speaks to the malleability of memory as a genuine neurological and psychological phenomenon and references various studies.

This source references multiple university level studies regarding false memories and makes a compelling case. While it is concise and easy to read, it does not offer more than an overview into this particular case, nor does it more than summarize the phenomenon of memory failure. It does demonstrate how and in what ways memory failure can affect each of us, and the implications that this memory failure can have in a professional environment. The issue of memory failure and the general populace's lack of understanding— and perceived immunity— may have led them to perceive a failure of memory as a failure of character.

Madden, Patrick. "More Good News For Nonfictionists." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 16.2 (2014): 183-87. *Jstor*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015.

<[http://za2uf4ps7f.search.serialssolutions.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/?sid=jstor:jstor&genre=article&iissn=15223868&eissn=15441733&volume=16&pages=183-188&spage=183&epage=188&atitle=More Good News for Nonfictionists&date=2014&title=Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction&issue=2](http://za2uf4ps7f.search.serialssolutions.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/?sid=jstor:jstor&genre=article&iissn=15223868&eissn=15441733&volume=16&pages=183-188&spage=183&epage=188&atitle=More%20Good%20News%20for%20Nonfictionists&date=2014&title=Fourth%20Genre%20Explorations%20in%20Nonfiction&issue=2)>.

This article is a review of two books on the fluidity of the nonfiction genre. The article commends the first of these books, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, for its demonstration on how the literary taxonomical system is fading. By use of this genre-

bending, the creative nonfiction in this book has become more thought-provoking and unconventional. The second book, *Understanding the Essay*, analyzes the works of some renowned essays, including their meanings and reasons for success. This article offers a brief summary of a few of these analysis's and praises for the book, but the author states his concern that most of the pieces analyzed were contemporary, and therefore did not analyze a wide enough variety of essays.

This article is useful in the identification of further sources to look for regarding research in creative nonfiction, as well as offering insight into the exact definition of creative nonfiction itself. The prose is easy to read and at times even witty—the concluding paragraph makes a pun of the literary taxonomy in stating that he, the author, does not want to “box the reader in”. The article is published in a creative nonfiction journal generally offering both reviews of creative nonfiction pieces and examples of them, and the piece stays true to the intent of the journal. While the author seemed to support genre-bending, it was never expressly established exactly when the genre-bending would mark a piece as no longer creative nonfiction.

Milford, Nancy. "The False Memoir." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 05 Feb. 2006.

Web. 08 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/02/AR2006020201897.html>>.

Referencing various popular memoirs and pieces that initially claimed to be so, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *An Unfinished Woman*, and Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, Milford analyzes the line between fact and fiction within a memoir, and the motivations

behind alteration of truth. She discusses the issue of memory and how it affects prose, as well as the notion that most memoirists write as a means of self-preservation, or as a way to feel some degree of control over their past.

Milford is a reputed biographer, as well as a recipient of multiple awards for her writing. Her piece is comprehensive, in that it covers both purposeful memoir fabrications as well as error of human memory. Also mentioned is the various techniques writers have included to thwart accusations of dishonesty in their memoirs, such as the annotations in Mary McCarthy's *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* which point out any inconsistencies, and Hemingway's disclaimer in *A Moveable Feast*. This article offers considerable analysis into the motives of the false memoirists, but still does not draw a definitive line between fact and fiction. This may be due to the idea— presented in this article through the Hemingway quote “there is always a chance that a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact,”— that even the words an author writes that are knowingly false still reflect some truth about their life.

Myers, Linda Joy. "How Much Truth to Tell: The Memoirist's Dilemma." *Journey of Memoir: The Three Stages of Memior Writing*. Berkeley: She Writes, 2013. 23-24. Print.

From the an interactive book on how to write a novel, this section focuses on the issue of truth in memoir. Stated in this piece is the idea that a writer has a right to voice his or her own interpretations of events and people, but suggests that research be done to add to the story's foundation. It is expressed that the changing of names, locations, alteration of time or sequence of events, and combining or omitting of characters does not

compromise the memoir's integrity as long as it is done with the preservation of truth in mind.

This source is helpful in establishing exactly to what degree a memoir can be altered before it is no longer considered a memoir. The idea of adding research to a memoir adds to the idea that a memoir or creative nonfiction piece written with truthful intent captures the main idea of memoir writing. The source clearly outlines what one can do and still have a piece considered a memoir, but is more vague than desired regarding exactly how many or in what ways details can be altered before the piece crosses the line between fiction and nonfiction. This may be because Myers believed, as was hinted, that the intent of the writer is more important than the accuracy of distinct details. An interesting topic for further investigation would be whether or not memoir is considered a memoir if the events depicted occurred only inside an individual's head. For example, if an individual afflicted with schizophrenia were to write a memoir including hallucinations she or he experienced, would this be considered a fabrication or a depiction of a mental illness? How would this scenario change if the author never expressly stated that some of the events occurred within their mind, or was not able to deduce the fact from the fiction?

O'Brien, Tim. "How to Tell a True War Story." *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*. New York: Broadway, 1998. 69-82. Print.

This piece is a short story of the genre metafiction, or a piece that is meant to blur the line between fact and fiction and draw attention to this ambiguity, and is usually read embedded with a group of other metafiction short stories written about the author's experiences in Vietnam. The subject matter of this particular short story is the telling of

stories, and to what extent the actual events of a story must have occurred for the story to be considered true. Written from the perspective of the author, the plot of “How to Tell a True War Story” centers around a comrade of the narrator telling a story telling a war story he initially claimed was completely factual, but later admitted that he invented bits with the intent of making the story “more true”.

At its surface interpretation, “How to Tell a True War Story” is a war story about telling war stories. However, it does go to offer a different perspective on the importance of verbatim retellings of events. O’Brien seems to suggest that, particularly against a backdrop as stressful as war, sometimes words must be changed and events rearranged to create authentic feelings and atmosphere for the reader. Analysis of this story may indicate that multiple dimensions of the truth exist in writing, and the conventional focus on events rather than feelings, atmosphere, or mood may not be the only valid assessment of truth.

Otgaar, Henry, Alan Scoboria, and Guilianna Mazzoni. "On the Existence and Implications of Nonbelieved Memories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23.5 (2014): 349-54. *Sage Journals*. Association for Psychological Science. Web. 31 Mar. 2015. <<http://cdp.sagepub.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/content/23/5/349.full.pdf.html>>.

This Journal offers a look at various experiments regarding memory implantation, and how no longer believing that a memory occurred affects how we perceive said memory. An experiment involving showing participants false pictures from their childhood demonstrated the ease at which many simple memories can be altered. The article goes

later to discuss the objective accuracy of any memory. Issues such as failure to recall facts accurately can lead to nonbelieved true memories, and social feedback can lead a person to discredit an entire memory based off of one faulty recollection.

This source is useful in understanding the limits of human memory and how this affects our recording of events we have perceived to happen. The Journal is reputable, regularly featuring articles from many leading experimenters and universities in the field of psychology. The text can be dense at times, and there is a lot of scientific jargon used, suggesting it is not intended for the average reader, but rather the scientific community. While it does include substantial information on how the memory recording process can be altered and how external input affects the way in which we perceive memories, the article does not discuss the long-term effects of false memories nor offer any input on particular case studies regarding more pronounced cases of memory implantation.

Otgaar H., Scoboria A., Smeets T.

(2013). *Experimentally evoking nonbelieved memories for childhood events*. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 39, 717–730