

READING AND TEACHING

THE
FAR
EDGES
OF
THE
FOURTH
GENRE

An Anthology of Explorations
in Creative Nonfiction

EDITED BY SEAN PRENTISS AND JOE WILKINS

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A COMPANION TEXT TO ACCOMPANY

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INTRODUCTION

We organized the essays in *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* in a manner that is intended to take readers on a journey from inside the early creative nonfiction classroom, with Mary Clearman Blew's "Walking Home," through a variety of permutations and considerations, and out into the world with Erik Reece's "The Act of Writing: Speak and Bear Witness." Still, we recognize that there are many other ways to organize and teach this book. Because this is an anthology about explorations, we encourage readers and teachers to find their own trails through *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*. We offer here another way to thematically group the essays.

THEMATIC GROUPS

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is changing the world we live in and the ways we tell stories. We publish online. We create and use interactive texts. And in a world of emails and text messages and the internet, much (maybe too much) of our waking time is spent in the digital world. How does technology shape, hinder, or benefit the creative nonfiction writer?

Three of the essays from *The Far Edges* address technology and creative nonfiction. Readers could begin this topic with Ander Monson's piece that explores how the essay form, at its best, resembles the explorative act of hacking. Then they could move on to Brenda Miller's essay "Writing Inside the Web," which explores life without, and trying to write without the internet and constant digital connection. And they could end with Jonathan Rovner's "Refresh," which explores the quandary of how to write about big, important, life-changing events that take place completely over text message and email.

TIME IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

Every essay has to deal with time. Whether we tell a story chronologically or not, the reader understands time exists, that it exerts a force on narratives and the reader's experience of them on the page. Time matters.

First, consider Bob Shacochis's "How to Wind the Clock of Your Days," an essay that defines and tries to reckon with "Big Huge Time and Itsy-Bitsy Time." Then,

in “Bald in Back with Three Heads” Nancer Ballard moves us from actual time to time on the page via scientific considerations that examine how and why time works as a way to understand the narrative of the lived life.

MEMORY AND TRUTH

What is truth? What is fact? Does memory work well? Why do we remember what we remember, and why do we construct narratives the way we do? Few topics in creative nonfiction generate more debates or lead to more wormhole discussions.

Three of the essays in *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* deal explicitly with the power and limitations of memory. H. Lee Barnes, in his essay, “Memory, Language, and Truth in the Written Moment,” looks at an event from multiple perspectives and time periods to examine the faulty nature of memory. Judith Kitchen asks us to move away from memory and into speculation in her essay “Gone A-Sailing.” Finally, Sean Prentiss considers the science of memory and argues for a new understanding of creative nonfiction in “Eternal Sunshine of the Nonfiction Mind.”

MEANING IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

We all have many stories to tell—stories of love lost and love found, of leaving home and coming home, of birth and death, and of riding bikes to our respective childhood rivers. These stories matter to us—but how do we make them matter to readers? How do we move beyond the anecdote? What questions do we ask to get to the story beneath the story?

Though in very different ways, Dinty W. Moore and Kim Barnes both take on this vital creative nonfiction topic. In “Rivering,” Moore offers us a metaphor, a way of writerly thinking that might help us swim more deeply into our own stories, while with her essay “The Art and Absence of Reflection in Personal Nonfiction” Barnes dissects passages from creative nonfiction writers she admires to help readers see how we might make universal our personal stories.

ON WRITING

Writing is a solitary pursuit. Something done alone and without witness. So, how is it done? How do great writers go about vision and revising? Too often, we read a brilliant essay and forget that the writer took a long journey, erasing her tracks, to arrive at the piece in our hands.

Joy Castro and Lia Purpura, however, allow us a glimpse into their respective processes. Once we learn the process of writing, we can examine why we write. Joy Castro's "Grip and Getting 'Grip'" walks readers through, in revealing and insightful detail, her process in arriving at "Grip," a stunning short essay also included here. While Lia Purpura offers a peek into her process in "Advice and On Writing 'Advice,'" the essay "Advice" itself, which follows the question and answer form of an advice columnist, interrogates the intertwined acts of thinking and writing.

THE PERCEIVED AND THE ACTUAL

Much of creative nonfiction exists in a continuum, somewhere between what is "creative" and what is "nonfiction." Different writers preference different ends of the spectrum, and as creative nonfiction writers it is necessary that we think about these questions for ourselves.

In "The Act of Writing," Erik Reece makes a passionate, convincing case for witnessing and writing the actual world. Then consider Robin Hemley's "Lines that Create Motion," an essay that focuses on all sorts of translations and makes an argument for the perceived object, the creatively translated object, as being the actual end of art—even creative nonfiction.

WHY WE TELL TRUE STORIES

Writer Vivian Gornick claims the need to tell stories "is as strong in human beings as the need to eat food and breathe air." We do indeed need to tell stories, and the cultural and academic rise of creative nonfiction over the past forty

years speaks to the way this need—once met in the pages of novels and short stories—is increasingly being fulfilled in essay and memoir.

Mary Clearman Blew’s essay, “Walking Home” details her conversion to creative nonfiction when she was assigned to teach a class in the genre at a small college in Idaho, highlighting and exploring this need to tell personal stories in the lives of her students—and in her own life. Move from there to Joe Wilkins’s essay, “Night,” in which the author attempts to understand his own need to remember and make a story of his father’s death and his subsequent boy’s life on the plains of eastern Montana.

QUESTIONS

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW, “WALKING HOME”

- Think about how your views of creative nonfiction have changed since first learning about the genre. Where do you think creative nonfiction will go in twenty years? Fifty years?
- Blew’s essay is one of the most narrative pieces in the collection. What makes it a craft essay, rather than just a personal essay?
- Do your creative nonfiction classes differ from your fiction or poetry classes? If not, should they? If so, how and why?

ANDER MONSON, “ESSAY AS HACK”

- What, exactly, does Monson mean when he says that an essay is a hack? Do some of his other metaphors (as interruption, as simulated mind, etc.) make more or less sense?
- Consider how Monson opens “Essay as Hack.” Who do you think is speaking? What kind of voice or person?
- Now, consider the ending of the essay. How has your picture of the author/speaker changed by the end of the essay? And what is Monson after with that last line: “I don’t know what this means”?

BRENDA MILLER, “WRITING INSIDE THE WEB”

- How does having or not having access to the internet affect your writing? Your thinking? Your life?
- How do Miller’s footnotes affect the piece?

- Miller begins and ends her essay with sections titled “Free Box.” How does (or doesn’t) the Free Box hold this essay together?

DINTY W. MOORE, “RIVERING”

- What is Moore’s “Invisible Magnetic River”? How does it work in the writing process?
- How do we, in Moore’s words, “follow the river” in our writing and “not force” the river?
- Is Moore arguing here that all successful essays or memoirs have “unseen ends”?

BOB SHACOCHIS, “HOW TO WIND THE CLOCK OF YOUR DAYS”

- What is “Big Huge Time?” What is “Itsy-Bitsy Time?”
- Why is each type of time important for creative nonfiction storytelling?
- How would Shacochis have us wield time in our stories? In our lives?

JONATHAN ROVNER, “REFRESH”

- How does the barrier of technology affect creative nonfiction?
- How do we bring to life events that take place in the vacuum of technology?
- Writing is always about choices—what to include, what to exclude. When, if ever, is it acceptable to ignore (or write around) our relationship to technology?

ROBIN HEMLEY, “LINES THAT CREATE MOTION”

- How is the act of translation related to creative nonfiction storytelling?
- Hemley claims that we should not be after “biography” but “significance” in our writing. Does significance necessarily mean we must stray from biography or autobiography?
- If we do stray from biography or autobiography how far can we stray

JOE WILKINS, “NIGHT”

- Wilkins is trying to tell the story of his father’s death in “Night,” yet there is much about that night that he doesn’t remember. What techniques does he use to construct this half-remembered memoir?
- What does Wilkins mean when he says, near the end of his essay, “story is a power beyond us?”
- Wilkins ultimately argues for a creative nonfiction that has its foundations in memory but does not refuse the connections or creations of story. Do you agree?

NANCER BALLARD, “BALD IN BACK WITH THREE HEADS”

- What piece of scientific research on time did you find most interesting?
- Think about the “breakfast interviews” that Ballard talks about. Do you agree with Daniel Stern’s reasoning about why we remember certain events but forget others? How does this affect your writing?
- Do you agree with Ballard’s assertion that fiction comes from the desire to ask “what if” while creative nonfiction comes from the desire to understand “why”?

JOY CASTRO, “GRIP AND GETTING ‘GRIP’”

- “Grip” is a potent, brief essay, and “Getting ‘Grip’” is looser, more expansive. How do you interpret this difference in style? What can these essays teach us about voice and persona in creative nonfiction?
- What part of Castro’s process did you find most unexpected?
- What part of Castro’s process do you think might most inform your own writing process?

LIA PURPURA, “ADVICE AND ON WRITING ‘ADVICE’”

- How would you characterize or describe Purpura’s sentences?

- An *ars poetica* is a poem written about or in praise of poetry. Could we characterize Purpura's "Advice" as an *ars essaya*? Why? How?
- How is the body, the physical body, like an essay? Or is it?

SEAN PRENTISS, "ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE NONFICTION MIND"

- Do readers expect the Truth from creative nonfiction? If so, is this a problem?
- Prentiss's essay argues that eyewitnesses are often mistaken. This would mean that writers' memory of an event is often inaccurate. Do you feel your memory is faulty? Does this affect how you write creative nonfiction?
- Would Prentiss's idea for redefining creative nonfiction improve the contract between creative nonfiction writers and readers? If so, why? If not, what ideas would you offer?

JUDITH KITCHEN, "GONE A-SAILING"

- What is the relationship between photography and truth? Between memoir or personal essay and truth?
- Is it okay for creative nonfiction writers to speculate?
- What does the use of speculation bring to a piece? Why might it be important to creative nonfiction?

H. LEE BARNES, "MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND TRUTH IN THE WRITTEN MOMENT"

- Is creative nonfiction like jury testimony in the sense that the writer's goal is to find the truth?
- Can two or more people have two or more versions of the truth? If so, is one version wrong? Is one version right?
- Barnes ultimately calls creative nonfiction an "illusion," albeit one with a strong tie to experience. How is Barnes's illusion like Hemley's translation or Prentiss's redefinition of creative nonfiction?

KIM BARNES, "THE ART AND ABSENCE OF REFLECTION IN PERSONAL NONFICTION"

- Is Barnes correct when she says that creative nonfiction writers need to ask themselves, "Who am I, and why?" in their essays and memoirs? And what does Barnes mean when she talks about the "why" of an essay?
- How do the essays Barnes highlights teach readers to read them?
- Barnes claims that personal essays are never about the writer. How, then, are they personal? And what is Barnes after with this claim?

ERIK REECE, "THE ACT OF WRITING"

- Do we have a responsibility as writers to bear witness? And how far does that responsibility extend?
- Reece took a number of risks, both to his physical being and to his standing in his community, in writing *Lost Mountain*. How far should a creative nonfiction writer be willing to go to tell a more truthful story?
- Take a side in the John D'Agata versus Erik Reece debate. D'Agata claims that creative nonfiction serves art rather than reality; thus, it is entirely acceptable to massage or change reality in the service of art. Reece argues that creative nonfiction that willfully manipulates reality surrenders its power to critique it. Who is correct, and why?

WRITING PROMPTS

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW, “WALKING HOME”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay that takes us through your entry into creative nonfiction. Show us how the genre and you have changed over the years.

PROMPT 2: Retell and consider someone else’s story. Does this other story bring you back to your own stories? Why or why not? Keep writing.

ANDER MONSON, “ESSAY AS HACK”

PROMPT 1: Monson’s essay works as an extended metaphor. Write an essay in which you compare your life, or some chapter of your life, to some activity you know well.

PROMPT 2: Monson begins with a grand, wise pronouncement and ends with his admission that he doesn’t understand something. Write an essay in which you use this same form. Begin big and sure, and end small and uncertain.

BRENDA MILLER, “WRITING INSIDE THE WEB”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay that uses footnotes. These footnotes should not just include extra information but should also forward the story.

PROMPT 2: Write a personal essay that has no internet research in it. Even though you should explore things you want/need to research, force yourself to not do any. Then write the same essay using research. Which is stronger? In what ways?

DINTY W. MOORE, “RIVERING”

PROMPT 1: Take one of your essays and write a corresponding essay in which you detail your “Invisible Magnetic River.” Take the reader on the journey as you explore how your essay has these three parts: (1) the invisible, (2) the magnetic, and (3), the river.

PROMPT 2: Research the river you live nearest to. Write a collaged essay into which you weave this research.

BOB SHACOCHIS, “HOW TO WIND THE CLOCK OF YOUR DAYS”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay in short, numerically arranged segments.

PROMPT 2: Write a personal/critical essay—an essay in which you weave some story of your life with literary critique.

JONATHAN ROVNER, “REFRESH”

PROMPT 1: Have you experienced a relationship completely (or nearly so) mediated by technology? If so, write about it. If not, write about a past relationship but focus technology in that relationship.

Prompt 2: Write an essay where you are in a situation with much emotional tension but little physical action. See how you can build that essay without much, or any, scene.

ROBIN HEMLEY, “LINES THAT CREATE MOTION”

PROMPT 1: Find an object that belongs to someone else. Then, as Hemley does, translate that object, following whatever suggestions of story or significance present themselves.

PROMPT 2: Write an essay in which you demand significance of some confusing moment in your life. If you struggle to find the significance, translate that moment. Reshape it and see what happens.

JOE WILKINS, “NIGHT”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay that begins with: “What I remember without qualification is ____.” As you move through the essay, don’t be afraid to ask imaginative questions and open up imaginative space.

PROMPT 2: Write an essay that argues for why a particular moment from childhood is important to your adulthood.

NANCER BALLARD, “BALD IN BACK WITH THREE HEADS”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay that uses scientific research to literally or metaphorically make sense of something.

PROMPT 2: Use some of the research from Ballard’s essay to reshape how you deal with time in one of your own essays.

JOY CASTRO, “GRIP AND GETTING ‘GRIP’”

PROMPT 1: Take one of your essays and discuss genre, audience, POV, submerged, synecdoche, title, form, and patience.

PROMPT 2: Write a short essay (under five hundred words) that opens and closes with the same image.

LIA PURPURA, “ADVICE AND ON WRITING ‘ADVICE’”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay in which two voices speak.

PROMPT 2: Make a list of five or six random questions you have been thinking about lately. Answer each question. How are your answers related? Revise with this idea in mind.

SEAN PRENTISS, “ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE NONFICTION MIND”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay that explores something you’ve remembered wrongly.

PROMPT 2: Write an essay that has multiple eyewitness accounts, especially if

those eyewitnesses contradict each other. Consider how different people might see a breakup or loss at a sporting event you were a part of.

JUDITH KITCHEN, “GONE A-SAILING”

PROMPT 1: Write your own essay using Kitchen’s seven prompts.

PROMPT 2: Start writing toward a prompt you find here or elsewhere, but as the essay progresses begin to argue with, call into question, or work against the construct of the prompt itself.

H. LEE BARNES, “MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND TRUTH IN THE WRITTEN MOMENT”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay where you remember an event (like Barnes’s Super Bowl party) one way but someone else remembers it a different way. Think about “the contradictions in testimony” that Barnes writes about.

PROMPT 2: Like Barnes does with his book, *Dummy Up and Deal*, take someone else’s story and sculpt it into narrative.

KIM BARNES, “THE ART AND ABSENCE OF REFLECTION IN PERSONAL NONFICTION”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay about yourself, but keep tying this personal story to the larger human condition.

PROMPT 2: Like in Brenda Miller’s essay, “The Date,” write an essay that has no reflection in it. Do this intentionally so the reader learns from your lack of reflection.

ERIK REECE, “THE ACT OF WRITING”

PROMPT 1: Write an essay about why you wrote a previous essay. Like Reece does in “The Act of Writing,” explore why you needed to write another essay.

PROMPT 2: Write an essay where you take sides in a political, social, or environmental battle like Reece does with *Lost Mountain*.

For teachers using this text or for writers looking for more ways to explore *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*, we offer a few resources. These include alternate strategies for reading and teaching the essays, as well as questions to consider and writing prompts to explore for each essay.

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JOE WILKINS is Associate Professor of English at Linfield College, and is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry*, and two collections of poems, *Killing the Murnion Dogs* and *Notes from the Journey Westward*.

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