

CHAPTER 10



The Ethics of Creative Nonfiction

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

—OSCAR WILDE

Creative nonfiction writers, intent on being creative *and* truthful, walk a thin line that other writers do not. Journalists and scholars, with their allegiance to fact, tend to avoid the ambiguities of memory and imagination. Fiction writers with their allegiance to story have no qualms about inventing interesting worlds. But creative nonfiction writers, with the intent to write good stories *that are true*, must grapple with the boundary between ethical and artistic clarity. Too much reportage and we cross into scholarship or journalism. Too much imagination and we cross into fiction.

In addition, creative nonfiction writers face other ethical concerns: our obligations to the people we are writing about, *real* people, often people we know well, people who didn't ask to be in our stories. Do we use their real names? Do we tell their secrets? The answers involve both ethical and legal questions that we must deal with before we share our work publicly.

I remember least of all—that I am sure. I specifically remember that it was way back when and it involved So-and-So who I knew so well.

Yes, I remember the amount also—It was \$6, \$7, perhaps \$20. And I remember that certain group went by the name that was popular back then.

I remember they came in the door like clockwork on the hour give or take ¼ hour.

I remember, and it's all so clear: February, April maybe August, close to the 3rd or just after the 29th.

Yes, definitely without a doubt, it was sometime between Sunday and Saturday.

Take it from me. I have the facts....

—PAT VAN WYK,
Cape May Workshop

Obligations to others also include our readers. We make a pact with them that we are writing truthfully. But memory, one of our key tools, is unreliable, so how much leeway do we have to use our imagination to fill in what is half-remembered—and still call the work nonfiction?

Finally, there are obligations to our subject: to capture what we see as true, *as powerfully as we can*. If, for accuracy, we clutter our descriptions with too much detail, our truth will be lost on the page. So we select and dramatize for clarity and suspense. We don't change the basic plot or invent characters; but we might condense time, make omissions, recreate once-heard dialogue, and make composite characters—all to allow readers better access to our experiences. To what extent can a nonfiction writer do this? This chapter will explore these questions and offer some guidelines based on what seasoned writers do.

The Intent to Write True

Intent matters. If our *intent* is to capture the messy, real world we live in, we fulfill the first obligation of creative nonfiction. Intent helps us resist the urge to change facts just to make a better story. It stops us from telling deliberate lies, even as we let our imagination fill in details we only vaguely remember. And it prevents us from using facts to mislead, the way news headlines sometimes do.

Some writers choose to write fiction because the obligation to write true inhibits their creativity. Pam Houston says of her short stories: "I write fiction to tell the truth." She is more honest, she feels, with the freedom to invent her characters and events. Other writers, like journalist Anna Quindlen, write fiction to avoid the pressure for factual accuracy. When writing a memoir, says Quindlen in her essay "How Dark? How Stormy? I Can't Recall," she checked the weather charts before she could publish the line, "It was very cold the night my mother died." Her impulse as a journalist, she explains, was to fact-check: "Was it very cold or was that just the trick memory played on a girl who was sick and shivering, at least metaphorically?" To avoid such concerns, she writes fiction where she can create new worlds with "the imagined minutiae of the lives of characters I invent."¹

"But what about your *true* stories?" we ask. Don't we tell our friends, family, especially our children, about who we were and

¹The full essay is available online from *The New York Times*, May 11, 1997.

who our family was? And don't we want to preserve those stories? If we stick only to hard, verifiable facts, our past is as skeletal as line drawings in a coloring book. We must color them in. Writers like Joan Didion relish that believing that the emotional truth of memory is what the writer must capture. We imagine her saying to Quindlen: If it *felt* cold to you, it *was* cold—whether it was 40 degrees or 2 degrees. No need to fact-check that.

But what happens if others remember differently, if their facts contradict the writer's version of memory? That happened to Mimi, whose mother read her essay about riding a black stallion, being thrown, and taking the bus home in humiliation:

"I picked you up by car!" she said.

"You didn't. I took the bus and everyone was staring at my bloody jodphurs."

"You were crying in the Pontiac."

"I was not."

One memory versus another. Mimi debated changing her story but decided not to. She reasoned that her mother may be remembering another time; her mother may feel guilty for not picking her up that day; no bus driver was available to ask nor was Stanley who ran the stables (assuming he'd remember one small event from fifty years ago); and there was certainly no newspaper account. So "the facts," as Mimi recalled them, stayed. In other writings, she might have mentioned the disagreement (as she is doing here). She might have said, "I can still imagine ... " to signal ambiguity. But in this short memoir there was no ambiguity: only the young girl, no longer a cowgirl, riding a bus in Queens.

She remembered the day as being sunny, I remembered a light drizzle with low gray clouds. She remembered being with me in the bedroom when I found my father's body. I remembered only my brother John being there.... There were other details where our memories conflicted, but in the end it didn't matter whether or not it had been sunny or rainy...because one thing had always remained certain: our father died that day, and both of us remembered watching the ambulance attendants carry his body out the front door.

—PETER IVES

Emotional Truth versus Factual Truth

Go to a writers' conference on creative nonfiction, and two terms—*emotional truth* and *factual truth*—can create a storm of controversy. The Anna Quindlens in the room insist on journalistic adherence to factual truth, rejecting even small inaccuracies of memory. The Joan Didions, standing beside them, argue that crafting one's *sense* of truth is what matters.

Partly, one's stance depends on a personal definition of what "true" is. Partly, it depends on the subject. In stories of childhood, rooted in memory, emotional truth holds sway; in investigative journalism, factual truth is expected. And partly, it depends on how famous you are. If you are a national figure writing your memoirs, readers become uneasy with even small discrepancies. But most of us are outside history's limelight. Our small moments remain small. We tell *our* stories, from *our* memories, based on living *our* ordinary lives; and readers accept subjectivity, and some memory glitches, as long as our intent is truthful.

For narrative journalism rooted in the here-and-now, we don't have to rely on memory to write true. We observe, take notes, record conversations, and snap photographs to inform and affirm our point of view. Richard Selzer in "Four Appointments with the Discus Thrower" (pp. 300–302) was right there in the hospital, making his rounds that included the patient he wrote about. Susan Orlean in "Meet the Shaggs" (pp. 303–313) traveled to Fremont, New Hampshire, to see where an unlikely band of four sisters got their start. She was looking for small details and the local historian supplied them, tidbits that shed light on a larger story, such as the sisters revealing that "following the death of their father they sold much of their [band] equipment and later let their kids horse around with whatever was left."

Selection and Omission

All good writing selects and omits material to shape point of view. The terms may vary, but creative nonfiction writers, like academics or journalists, present their best evidence, back it up with support, and provide outside authority by *choosing* some quotations over others. Choice always shapes a text, whatever the genre. Writers decide what's important to the subject and leave the rest out.

[E]very structure—be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious—that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out.

—MARK C. TAYLOR

That explains why Scott Russell Sanders, who wrote about his father's alcoholism in "Under the Influence," barely mentions it in another father/son essay called "Reasons of the Body." Only one line:

In his sober years, which are the hours and years I measure him by, he would have laughed and then challenged me to a round of golf or a bout of arm wrestling, contests he could still easily have won....

"Isn't that misleading?" students ask, because drinking, after all, was a major issue in their shared life. Or did Sanders's decision to focus on other aspects of the relationship make the second essay truer to itself? We would argue the second. Sanders didn't lie about his father. He didn't make him into a teetotaler. That would have been fiction. But to explore another powerful part of their relationship, he selected what he felt captured a bond built on more than drink:

For me, the arena was a concrete driveway, where I played basketball against my father, shooting at a rusty hoop that was mounted over the garage. He had taught me to dribble, how to time my jump, how to follow through on my shots. To begin with, I could barely heave the ball to the basket, and he would applaud if I so much as banged the rim. I banged away, year by year, my bones lengthening, muscles thickening....Many of those hours my father was tinkering in the garage, which reverberated with the slap of my feet and the slam of the ball....

It is the same garage as in "Under the Influence" and the same emotional tension exists, but with different facts. All true *and* appropriate. For our lives are never a one-note experience; we must find all the other notes through selection and omission, as Sanders does, to capture their full music.

Where's the Line on Storytelling Techniques?

Omission and selection are part of every genre. So are storytelling techniques such as anecdote and description. But some storytelling techniques—exaggeration, elaboration, collapsing time, and composite characters—make creative nonfiction writers ask: How far can I go and still call my work nonfiction? Worth asking, but only *after* a draft, as every seasoned writer will tell you. To keep “creative” in nonfiction you need to write first and then decide what genre to call it. Many a personal essay or memoir (nonfiction) has become a short story or novel (fiction)—and vice versa—to allow the writer to express what was needed while keeping integrity intact.

Exaggeration

We all exaggerate for effect, but how much is too much when calling work creative nonfiction? Let's take on Anna Quindlen's dilemma. Suppose on the night of a funeral it was actually 80 degrees, and we remember sweating and shivering as we write: “It was very cold the night my mother died.” Is this a lie? We would argue no, not if the writer felt that chill, but we would suggest including the temperature to make the “chill” that much more powerful. Some might argue for a rewrite: “*I* felt very cold the night my mother died.” But by changing the pronouns from *it* to *I*, the distance and some interiority of feeling may be lost. The writer must ask: Is it worth the loss?

Seasoned writers know how to signal exaggeration, as Russell Baker does in his memoir, *Growing Up*. He depicts his first boss, who was interviewing him for a paper route, as a major “executive of the Curtis Publishing Company,” creating the humor that makes the scene work:

He bent low from the waist and shook my hand. Was it true, as my mother had told him, he asked, that I longed for the opportunity to conquer the world of business? My mother replied that I was blessed with a rare determination to make something of myself.

“That’s right,” I whispered.

“But have you got the grit, the character, the never-say-quit spirit it takes to succeed in business?”

My mother said I certainly did.

“That’s right,” I said.

He eyed me silently for a long pause, as though weighing whether I could be trusted to keep his confidence, then spoke

man-to-man. Before taking a crucial step, he said, he wanted to advise me that working for the Curtis Publishing Company placed enormous responsibility on a young man. It was one of the great companies of America. Perhaps the greatest publishing house in the world....

For Baker, at eight years old, his potential boss looms like a CEO, and he signals his use of exaggeration by his mother's ongoing insertions. Readers know what the author is up to and laugh.

Problems arise if readers do not know—and feel tricked. Then exaggeration becomes deception. The daughter who writes that her father permanently disowned her when he threw her out for only one night, or the soldier who writes he fought in the Gulf War when he never left his base in New Jersey, must signal where factual truth and emotional truth part company. Otherwise, they violate a main tenet of creative nonfiction that, as Bret Lott puts it, is simply this: Don't lie. *Tip:* For other ways, aside from exaggeration, to signal readers about where fact meets imagination in your work, read Lisa Knopp's "Perhapsing" (pp. 333–335).

Elaboration

Memoirists and personal essayists often recreate the past with half-remembered detail. A second-grade teacher needs a name, a face, and something to wear—A pair of jeans and a t-shirt? A plaid dress?—and most creative nonfiction writers trust the subconscious to remember what the conscious self does not. If we have a photo, we use it, but otherwise we assume that readers understand that any true story about second grade is based on a mix of memory and imagination. We, in creative nonfiction, make some of those assumptions even with here-and-now events. Mimi's conversation with her mother about the bus memory, for example, was recreated without notes or a tape recorder. She assumes readers of this genre don't need, "I didn't have a tape recorder, but I think my mother said..." to make the moment credible. That's what telling a story is all about.

Collapsing Time

When our friend Jack Connor wrote a short essay about taking students to watch eagles in Owl Creek, he not only omitted two of four students but also collapsed time—three days into one morning—to move the story along. "Isn't that fiction?" students ask. We would argue no because his intent was true: to capture what students

taught him as they watched eagles together on a winter day. If he combined details from day two and day three—even the dialogue—and put them all in one day, we are glad he did as long as he did not make up events that never happened. If, for example, he said they saw baby eagles when they didn't, he'd better call his work fiction.

Composite Characters

The most controversial storytelling technique for creative nonfiction writers involves the creation of *composite characters*. Using this technique, writers combine several people into one, often to protect the privacy of friends and family. For example, if you want to write about two friends who suffer from anorexia, you might invent a name, physical traits, and background, and then create a character based on both of their experiences. Your two friends may feel relieved, but will readers appreciate your tact? Absolutely not, some will say, outraged at the deception. But most readers, we've found, not only don't mind, they are glad that you have *not* invaded the privacy of the non-famous.

One solution that most creative nonfiction writers agree on: let your readers know what you are doing—and why. Your credibility is at stake. Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú wrote about the death of her brother, Nicolas, in her memoir about Guatemala. Only later on did reporters discover that Nicolas was alive. Menchú's explanation: he was a composite figure for all those young men, including other brothers, who were murdered or starved to death. But she never mentions "composite" in her book, and readers felt betrayed, a pact of truth violated.

On the other hand, Cathy N. Davidson in *36 Views of Mount Fuji* freely admits in her Acknowledgments that she used composite characters when writing her memoir about teaching English in Japan. Judging from the book's popularity, the admission had no ill effects on readers:

Composite characters... allow[ed] me to report actual events but to blur details in order to preserve the anonymity of the people involved.

Her concern for the privacy of her friends was so great that until she thought to make composites she found herself blocked as a writer, fearing "a personal account might be embarrassing to the individual Japanese who inspired it." Composites enabled her to tell her story and informing her readers preserved her integrity.

What We Owe Our Readers

Most readers, as Davidson discovered, don't mind some invention, as long as they are not being duped. To avoid misunderstanding, especially about faulty memory, writers have developed a range of disclaimers. John Irving writes "Please remember that all memoir is fiction" to open his essay, "Trying to Save Piggy Sneed." Mary Carr does the same with the title of her memoir, *The Liar's Club*, and Lauren Slater signals with title and disclaimer, by starting her memoir, *Lying*, with the words "I exaggerate."

When speculating about the past, writers use phrases such as "I imagine her" or "Perhaps he said" to signal imagined scenes. Bret Lott's disclaimer in his essay "First Names" is a lament about not remembering:

The sad thing, though, is that I can't recall the first day he called me Daddy when I went into his room. I could make up a story about it, here and now; I could tell you how it was on a Tuesday—Melanie's morning—and how there seemed something different in his voice as I came up from sleep, the sheets on Melanie's side of the bed already thrown back, my wife slowly rounding the footboard on her way out of the room....

—*Fathers, Sons, and Brothers*

Finally, writers who change names to disguise identities use a variety of markers—before, after, or in the middle of their work—to let readers know what they are doing. Here are some examples:

- ✿ "This story is true, as I remember it, but I've changed names and disguised identities to protect those who didn't ask to be in my story." (in a preface)
- ✿ "I've changed the names to protect the privacy of the non-famous." (in a footnote)
- ✿ "I met Luke Michaels (that's what I call him here) outside of Walmart." (in the text)

Our experience has been that such gestures boost credibility and undermine nothing, as long as the markers have a light touch. The writer who keeps saying "I can't be sure" or "I don't remember but" must either make the struggle of remembering what is central to the story or find a more creative way to disclose. Otherwise you

lose your readers who will naturally wonder, “Why should I spend my time reading about things you can’t recall?”

Writing about Family

Kim Barnes, before she published her coming-of-age memoir *In the Wilderness*, showed her parents the manuscript. She was nervous that her father, in particular, would be angry at her version of her rebellion against the Pentecostal religion of her parents. But his main complaint, she said in an interview in *Fourth Genre*, was about a few small facts she had wrong. Much relieved, she realized:

One thing that we always assume, wrongly, is that if we write about people honestly they will resent it and become angry. If you come at it for the right reasons and you treat people as you would your fictional characters—you know, you don’t allow them to be static—if you treat them with complexity and compassion, sometimes they will feel as though they’ve been honored, not because they’re presented in some ideal way but because they’re presented with understanding.

Her advice is an excellent guideline for writing about family, friends—and strangers, too: to write honestly, but with respect. To show a fully developed character, not a caricature. To capture people—even our least favorite—with complexity and empathy, not in anger or for revenge. We all vent in our notebooks, but in stories meant to be shared, we need to get our subjects “right”—not just for the moment, but for all the days that follow.

While literature is an art, it is not a martial art...no place to defend yourself from an attack, real or imagined, and no place to launch an attack.

—ANNIE DILLARD

Not everyone bravely shares work with family, the way Barnes did. Some count on family members not reading it. If necessary, they may, like best-selling writer Frank McCourt, wait years. Sure that his mother would be embarrassed by tales of their poverty, he didn’t publish *Angela’s Ashes* until after her death.

Still others, preferring good relations to publication, let family members decide. About writing *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard says:

My parents are quite young. My sisters are watching the book carefully. Everybody I'm writing about is alive and well, in full possession of his faculties and possibly willing to sue....Things were simpler when I wrote about muskrats....As a result...I've promised my family that each may pass on the book. I've promised to take out anything that anyone objects to—anything at all.

To grant such power, you had best have a reasonable family—or you might never write another word.

Some writers, like James McBride, try a collaborative approach to family stories. To write *The Color of Water*, McBride taped his mother's story during hours of interviews and then wrote alternating chapters, one in his voice, one in hers. Poet Hilda Raz joined forces with her son to write a memoir called *What Becomes You*, also in alternating chapters. The power of authority, usually in the hands of one, says Raz, is shared but not diluted—and there are other perks. “By exchanging and critiquing drafts, he pushed me to greater and greater candor,” she says of her son. “It's been hard but important for both of us.”

There's always the option of calling our work fiction. We once taught a workshop where a student was writing a memoir about her uncle in the Mafia. “Call it fiction, please!” the group advised—“and be sure no one is recognizable!” Even when writing about more innocuous figures, like an admired grandmother, some writers opt to call their work fiction. Bret Lott wrote his best-selling book, *Jewel*, as fiction, even though it was 90 percent true. It gave him room to maneuver creatively, but also, he says, “It was nice to tell my grandmother, ‘Oh, that was greatly exaggerated!’” when she questioned his portrayal of her. The word “fiction” satisfied her.

Some family stories, even painful ones, must be told as true. That's what Helen Fremont decided, after the research for a novel she was planning to write revealed her parents' great secret: that they were Jews and Holocaust survivors. Her grandparents, she discovered, had not died in a bombing as she'd always thought but in Auschwitz. Fiction felt wrong not only because the real story was powerful but also because no matter what the family fallout, the truth had to be preserved: to bear witness and pay tribute. In *After the Long Silence*, Fremont writes:

In effect, my grandparents and aunts and uncles had been wiped off the face of the earth by fascist regimes. There are no gravestones, or

markers, and the generation of eyewitnesses is rapidly dwindling. Holocaust revisionists and deniers increasingly dismiss the fact of the extermination of Jews as fiction or fantasy, and I felt it important to add my voice to the record. Fiction no longer served my needs: I realized that I had to write the story, finally, as memoir.

One thing that all creative nonfiction writers agree upon: issues of ethics and obligations are decided on a case-by-case basis, after there's a solid draft. The options, as we see them, are these: to call your final draft fiction, not nonfiction; to modify what feels fictional to bring it closer to what happened (often this complicates work in good ways); to put your draft in a drawer for a while and wait; to publish and keep your fingers crossed that those involved won't read about themselves; to show your work to "your characters" and solicit their feedback. Whatever you choose, be sure to wait until later in the writing process, so you don't stop yourself from writing true as you recreate characters and their experiences as best you can.

Writing about Everyone Else

Writing about those we don't live with, who don't share our name, is both easier and harder. It is easier in that we can keep their identities private if we want to, by giving pseudonyms and/or changing a few details. It's harder in that we have to get them "right" without a shared history of years; we may only have a few interviews, or less, to capture the personality of someone we barely know. If we are unfair, inattentive, sloppy with facts, lacking compassion, one-sided in understanding, and just generally get them "wrong," real people get hurt, people who trust us. And unless they want to sue or write their own versions, they lack the many ways that family and friends have for making their displeasure felt.

What the Law Says

In addition to being an ethical issue, writing about real people is a legal issue. Writers need to consider the threat of a lawsuit (even though it is hard for the plaintiffs to win). Writers can be sued for libel if they say something that defames someone's character and is not true. Writers can also be sued for invasion of privacy, in which truth is no defense, according to Carol Meyer, author of *The Writer's*

Survival Manual: “Even if what you say is true, you can be sued for invasion of privacy, especially under the false-light and embarrassing facts concepts.” False light refers to “embellishing, fictionalizing, or distorting certain facts” to make a person look bad. Embarrassing facts refers to making disclosures the person has not given you permission to reveal. So whenever possible, lawyers usually advise, it’s best not to use a person’s real name without permission. If you don’t have that permission and plan to publish, change the name—and let the reader know.

Crossing the Line?

In *A Thousand Little Pieces*, James Frey wrote that he’d been in jail for months instead of hours. This was one of many fabrications he wrote in what he had submitted to publishers as a novel. They accepted the manuscript, but as memoir, not as fiction—and Frey, alas, didn’t alter the story. Nor did he inform readers of the change in genre. Post-publication, the fabrications were noted, and critics were outraged. Frey’s memoir lost all credibility, they said. Nonetheless, the book remained on the bestseller list for months; enough readers, evidently, didn’t care as long as Frey told a good story.

This same issue keeps making new headlines. In “The Life Span of a Fact,” John D’Agata defends his right in *About a Mountain*, a creative nonfiction book about Las Vegas, to alter facts on aesthetic grounds.² Pink becomes purple because, he says, he “needed the two beats in purple.” Bucket Saloon becomes Bucket of Blood for the same reason: cadence. D’Agata also makes more significant changes of fact: he reduces the number of suicides on the day his subject, Levi Presley, a real person, jumps off a real roof. “I wanted his death to be unique,” D’Agata explains. He has his defenders, but many (including us) feel he violates the tenet at the heart of creative nonfiction: the intent to tell the truth. That means not only reporting the correct number of suicides, but also leaving pink, pink, even as you wish for purple.

And yet “the times, they are a-changin’.” Colin Rafferty discovered this ten years after writing his essay “Boys Least Likely To,” which is told from the point of view of a third shooter at the killings at Columbine High School. The press, even papers like *USA Today*, first wrote that “beyond the two dead gunmen, students described

²*The New York Times Book Review*, February 26, 2012.

seeing another youth dressed in a white shirt throwing bombs that looked like soda cans.” In fact, there was no third shooter, but Rafferty wrote the essay anyway, quoting the newspapers, and then indicating up front that his speaker was invented:

“Caveat: I am the third shooter from Columbine. These are the lies I will tell you....”

Ten years ago, editors were convinced that Rafferty’s story was fiction, even if everything outside of the narrative voice was factual. Fast forward to today. At a writers’ conference where Rafferty tells the essay’s story, several editors, including us, go up afterwards to talk with him; we are all interested in the dilemma he has created between fiction and creative nonfiction. You can read the whole story in “Ten Year Reunion: Writing ‘Boys Least Likely To’” (pp. 355–358) and decide for yourself what to call it.

One Last Word

The brothers Geoffrey Wolff and Tobias Wolff both wrote coming-of-age memoirs about their lives after their parents divorced. Geoffrey, who lived with his father, wrote *The Duke of Deception*, and Tobias, who lived with his mother, wrote *This Boy’s Life*. At a writers’ workshop, Geoffrey recounted that their mother read both books and said both versions were wrong. “So write your own!” both sons responded.

Most of those we write about have no such recourse. We are writing their world for them, as *we* see it. That is the great potential of the genre: to capture one person’s view of real life, with clarity, passion, and grace. But we need to remember that real people are in our hands. We have the power to authenticate them, to bear witness to who they were—these mostly ordinary people who would never make the history books. We must use our power honestly, and well.

Ways In ...

1. Write two portraits of someone you feel strongly about. Write one that he or she will never read. Write another that you will share. Which one is truer? If you like some of each, write a

third, and then decide whether you would use her or his real name or a pseudonym. Why?

2. Force yourself to write a first line that challenges your current mood. For example, if you're feeling low, begin with "I'm great because ... " If you're feeling furious, begin with "It's funny that ... " Keep writing, continuing with that premise, but don't make up events. Our experience has been that what you end up with won't be a lie, no matter how hard you try. Your imagination will find a way to tell the truth.
3. Try writing speculatively using the word "perhaps" as Lisa Knopp explains in her essay, "Perhapsing" (pp. 333–335). If your memory of a past event is sketchy, use "perhaps" to fill in details that might or could have happened, including some dialogue that you hear in your head as true.

