

Creative Nonfiction, or The Literature of Reality

Lee Gutkind says creative nonfiction is “True stories well told.” A writer uses **the same literary elements of fiction** and applies them to real events in vivid, dramatic fashion.

“The word ‘creative’ in creative nonfiction has to do with how the writer conceives ideas, summarizes situations, defines personalities, describes places -- and shapes and presents information. ‘Creative’ doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen, reporting and describing what wasn’t there. It doesn’t mean the writer has a license to lie. The word ‘nonfiction’ means the material is true.”

- *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up* by Lee Gutkind

Stories can exist as individual essays or be printed as single elements in literary journals, but when pulled together for a book they become a **memoir**. A memoir is a personal narrative written for a specific audience on a specific selection of topics or themes. Memoirs draw in readers because of the writer or the content, or sometimes both. If you are interested in military matters or American history, you might read a memoir by a former United States Army General. (An example is *Fighting the Cold War: A Soldier’s Memoir* by General John R. Galvin.) If one of your favorite fiction authors writes a memoir, you might pick it up because you know you’ll like the writing style and you’re curious to know what inspired the writer to write. (An example is *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway)

A memoir is not an autobiography. Someone who writes about his or her entire life in a chronological way is writing an autobiography. It’s an accounting of time and events, how one thing led to another. A memoir is autobiographical, but it generally covers a specific time period or series of events connected by a singular theme. For example, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote *Eat, Pray, Love* to record a year-long spiritual journey traveling to Italy, India, and Bali. She mentions other aspects of her life as it relates to the journey, but the memoir is primarily about her travels.

Sometimes a writer pulls together a collection of essays that point to a larger topic, such as *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, which is a *reference book* about writing. It’s not a memoir, but it looks like one. Lamott uses personal examples from her professional life to inspire wannabe writers.

Writing a memoir is tricky because memory is a fickle thing. We see life through our own lenses, so how we perceive an event may not be exactly how it actually happened! We don’t always remember conversation word-for-word or recall each detail as it occurred, so there is a bit of wiggle room when it comes to telling a story involving other people. As long as the context and meaning is the same, readers will forgive the writer for not getting everything perfect.

Dialogue in a memoir, as in fiction, helps the story along. To make sure you get the conversation as accurate as possible, talk to the people who show up in your story.

Cross-reference your version with his/her version. Do they align? Is his/her memory completely different from yours? Let these revelations help carve a deeper story.

Like a fiction writer, **memoirists must do their research**. Never has there been a memoirist who sat down and typed it all out and got it all correct. Remember, memory is fickle. Maybe you forgot the timeframe in which something happened, or you can't place every person who was present. Unless the memory is completely internal and only privy to you, it's likely you'll need to double-check with others to make sure your story is straight. *Memoirists, like fiction writers, spend lots of time drafting timelines, deciding which details are pertinent or not, and how to leave the reader craving more. They connect dots, they notice patterns, and they weave life events together like they were in sync all along.*

"The novel is a way of creating a mythic truth from your personal mythos. And the contract with the reader is that the reader is sharing your myth, and that's powerful simply because we're a storytelling species. We like stories. The nonfiction act is similar to that, except that it satisfies our hunger for the real and our need to make sense, make order, out of chaos."

- Ron Powers, contributing editor of *GQ* magazine and Pulitzer Prize winner

Five Hallmarks of Creative Nonfiction (according to Philip Gerard, author of *Creative Nonfiction*):

1. **It has an apparent subject and a deeper subject.** The apparent subject may seem mundane, but there's more there if you dig deep. There is something to be learned.
2. **It is timeless.** Even when a memoir is set in present day, it will still be relevant a hundred years from now. The lessons learned by the writer, and therefore presented to the reader, are truths that exist across all time and space. A strong writer will reach back in history and apply past lessons to current obstacles and will bring the reader along in that journey.
3. **It tells a good story.** It moves, it's fluid. There's action and tension, and the reader is eager to know what happens next. *Pacing* and *stakes* just as important in a memoir as it is in fiction.
4. **It contains a sense of reflection on the part of the author.** Memoirists spend a lot of time on their work. They brood and suffer for it. If done well, the reader will feel the amount of sweat and tears the writer has sunk into the story. It is not a "Here's what happened" kind of story. Instead, it's "Come in, sit down, and let me tell you what I've been through."
5. **Creative nonfiction shows serious attention to the craft of writing.** Memoirists play with words and create elegant, new ways of relaying ideas. They avoid clichés and obvious endings. More than ever, *voice* is present in a memoir. There is a keen sense that a particular story can only be told by a particular person. Good writing has a rhythm to it.