The Place of Creative Nonfiction at the Dinner Table of Literature

or My Contribution to Western Civilization

MARION WINIK

THE LITERARY MEMOIR was once a form dominated by great white whales—that is, elderly, important public personages like Winston Churchill or Simone de Beauvoir, along with a few non-white ones, like Malcolm X. Beginning in the 1990s, it enjoyed a renaissance driven by baby-boomer writers with screwed-up lives, like Mary Karr, the brothers Geoffrey and Tobias Wolff, Augusten Burroughs, and your humble correspondent. These days, the memoir and its little cousin, the personal essay, have become staples of graduate and undergraduate writing programs, and have begun to trickle down into secondary and even primary school writing curricula. Just the other day, I found myself discussing the form with an auditorium full of fourth- and fifth-graders in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I read them an excerpt from *The Lunch-Box Chronicles*, my memoir about single motherhood, in part of which I assumed the voice of my then-seven-year-old son to complain about various inequities in life and literature. The chapter is titled "The Implications of Birth Order in Personality Development, or This Book is Unfair to Vince!"

Afterwards, I had the students write their own mini-essays in which I invited them to beef about things that were unfair in their lives. As you can imagine, they warmed to the task. Just about every kid in the room was eager to share his piece at the microphone—and the upshot is, the makers of PlayStation and Xbox have a lot to answer for. Ninety percent of youthful experiences of injustice have a video game system somewhere in the story.

In any case, creative nonfiction—the term most commonly used to describe the literary genre to which the memoir, the personal essay, and the "What's unfair" assignment belong—is enjoying great popularity right now, in both high culture and low. But what, exactly *is* creative nonfiction, how does it relate to

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other literary forms and how do you help students to understand this?

Since the subject is memoir, let me start with a bit of my own story. When I began writing (at roughly the age of those young Pennsylvanians I addressed the other day), I wrote poetry. Poetry gave me the freedom to examine my experiences and to speak directly from my heart, to figure out who I was and it explain it to everyone else. This urge carried me all the way through the first year of an MFA program, when a couple of professors were a little mean to me and I got discouraged. Well, I thought, I'll show you. I'll write prose. Since it was the early 1980s—more than a decade before the first graduate program in nonfiction would open at the University of Pittsburgh—what awaited me on the other side of the line-break divide was fiction.

Since I was still more interested in excavating my own personality than in making anything up. I wrote a few autobiographical short stories, got my degree, and sputtered to a halt.

Nearly five years later, in 1987, I woke up with an idea for a piece of writing. It was called "How To Get Pregnant in the Modern World," and it dealt with my adventures doing just that. It wasn't a short story, it wasn't a poem, it was a new kind of work for me and I didn't know what to call it. I settled on the phrase "humor piece" because I had never heard the term personal essay. This turned out to be the start of a trend—for me and everybody else. Soon the personal essays of Montaigne, Sei Shonagon, Virginia Woolf, and E.B. White would come marching out of the library and into the pages of anthologies, tracing the roots of the hot new genre. So while I had to accept that I hadn't actually invented the personal essay after all, I did have the fun of being part of a movement.

What liberation I experienced in finding the essay form! I had always wanted to write in my own voice, an internal voice closely related to how I think and speak, rather than the more orchestrated and decorated voice I tended to use in poetry and in my autobiographical fiction. Also, I had always been more interested in writing about real life, about the narratives unfolding around me every day, than in the world of the imagination (or at least the world of my imagination—as a reader, I am a passionate fiction lover). In discovering personal essay, the vehicle for both of these goals, I gained access to a huge, pent-up store of ideas. The day I wrote "How To Get Pregnant," I also wrote a list of potential themes for pieces, and it lasted me about a decade.

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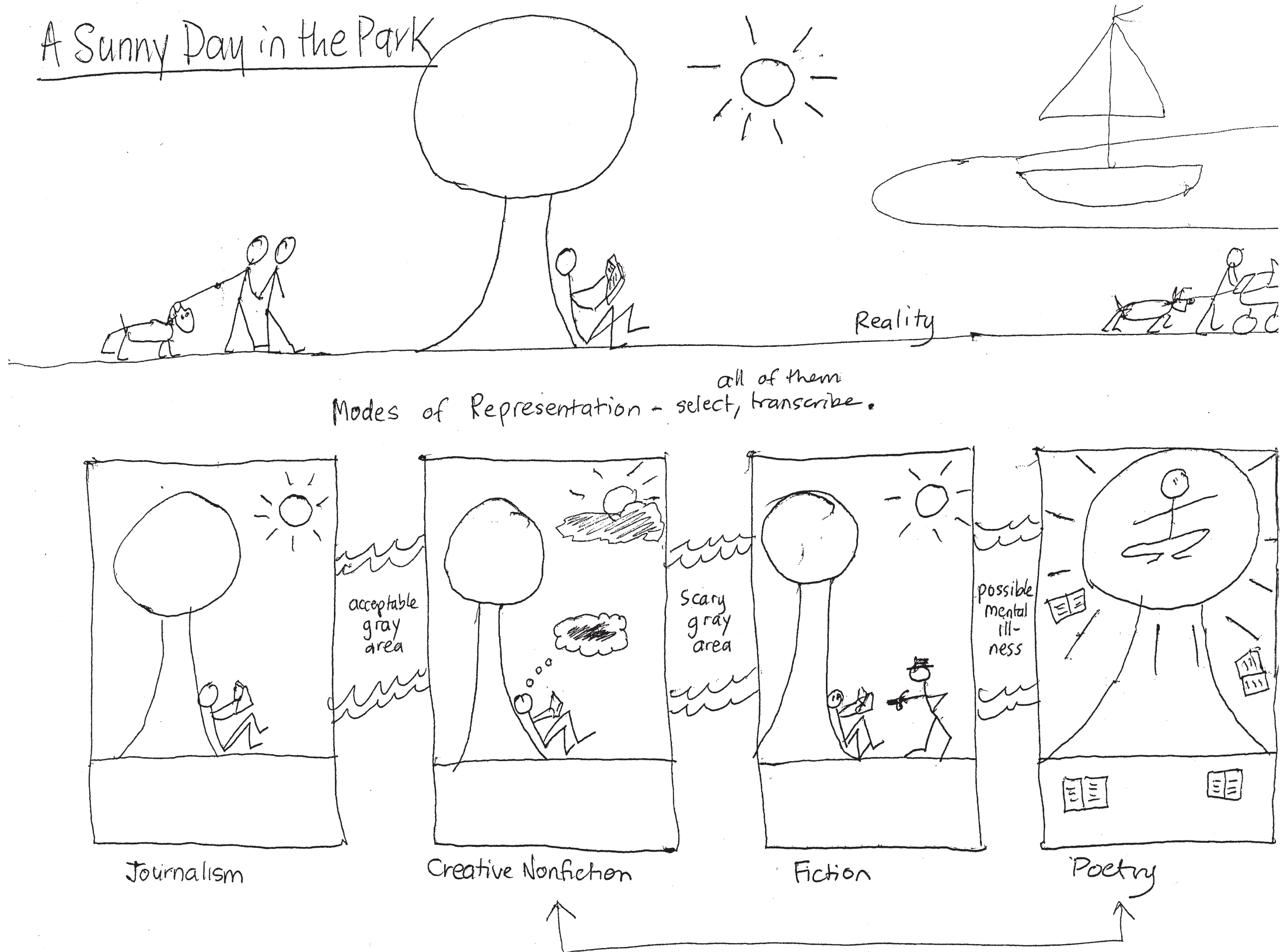
Over the years I've become very involved with the genre of creative nonfiction, not just as a writer but as a teacher and editor. I've been present at many discussions about what the form is and isn't and what it allows. Though James Frey's misfortunes with *A Million Little Pieces* brought these matters into the public eye, where they have somewhat annoyingly remained ever since, everyone who writes about his or her life begins to confront questions about the responsibility to the truth. Patricia Hampl, Mimi Schwartz, Sue Williams Silverman, Vivian Gornick, and Joan Didion have all written interestingly on the subject, and my contribution to the discussion is the diagram below, born of a desire to simplify matters.



Drawing by Marion Winik.

A *Sunny Day in the Park* represents the world, and it is the world that inspires all of us—to some degree every writer has the urge to record, to describe, to translate his or her sensory perceptions into language. The first decision any writer makes, no matter what the form he or she chooses, is what part of the world to write about—is it the couple walking the dog? Is it the person under the tree? Is it sailing? Is it parenting? Is it turf upkeep and park management?

In this illustration, all four writers have chosen the same portion of reality to represent. However, what does and does not end up on the page is very different.

Journalism is the most literal of the forms, the one with the greatest allegiance to what we call real life, to our shared reality. The journalist's urge is to bring the world to the world—whether delivering it from New Delhi to New York, from the streets of the ghetto to the kitchen tables of the suburbs, from the White House to my house. So, if compelled to write about the sunny day in the park, the journalist will tell us the weather, the day of the week, and the name and occupation of the reader under the tree, as well as the title of the book being read. The article might be about the role of the reader in some newsworthy event of the day, her opinion on some current issue, perhaps the advantages of the printed book vs. the electronic one. Whatever the story, the standard it will adhere to is objectivity. In traditional journalism, you will learn who, what, when, where, and why, but you will probably not get to know the writer at all, and every one of the facts reported will check out.

If the writer is a creative nonfiction writer, the

person under the tree is very likely him or herself. And the facts of the situation, while they should be truthfully reported, will recede in importance compared to the mood or thoughts of the narrator. So if that reader is me, for example, and I have just learned my husband is having an affair and have gone to the park to read his secret diary which I just found under our bed, my essay may not mention weather at all. If the sun is shining brilliantly, I may not know it, or will see it through a film of disillusionment and irony. The truth will be filtered through my subjectivity, and the reality I am describing is not primarily the park, it's what's in my head. In creative nonfiction, you will get to know the writer at least as well as the subject, and often much better.

In between these two genres lies what is usually called new journalism or immersion journalism. Pioneers in this area were Joan Didion, George Plimpton, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter S. Thompson. These writers go the park to write about it, but bring their subjectivity with them. It will be a story about the park—rather than a story about my husband's secret diary—but in addition to verifiable facts about the park, you will get a sense of the reporter and what he or she makes of them, even how she or she becomes part of them.

A piece of fiction inspired by the reader beneath the tree on the sunny day in the park would bring a "what if?" question into the mix, inventing circumstances beyond the real ones and grafting them together in unpredictable and interesting ways. What if a mugger shows up? What if the book is six months overdue? What if this is a park on the planet Zargon? Though fiction generally aims to reveal truths about parks and the people in them, these are not fact-checkable truths and the writer can alter the circumstances of the situation which inspires his story with total impunity.

In between creative nonfiction and fiction lies poor James Frey (and over toward journalism, the even more deeply buried Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass)—but also David Sedaris and Frank McCourt, writers who survived with substantially less bloodshed everybody's realization that they invented and exaggerated some things. This gray area is scary because the amount of subjectivity and "creativity" allowed in creative nonfiction is hard to pin down. No one was running a tape recorder on those household conversations from the author's childhood—so we generally accept invented dialogue. We accept composite characters and situations, especially if they are identified as such. What we don't like is lying, hoaxes, or embellishments added to make the story more sensational or interesting. And we do encourage creative nonfiction writers to verify those memories they can—whether by checking old weather reports or talking to those who shared various experiences with them,

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In poetry, there are no rules of representation. The persona or the speaker is at the center of the reality, not the landscape. The park, the sun, the book, the words: all emanate from the writer's decision about voice and language. (Which is why I joke that between fiction and poetry lies possible mental illness—because if there are no rules and you can make up anything you want and you're at the center of everything—well, I think they call it schizophrenia or something.)

The arrow that connects poetry to creative nonfiction represents the spiritual closeness of these two forms. Both take us into the heart of a real person, the "I" who is speaking. This arrow is that path I followed to get from poetry to nonfiction in my own writing,

and explains why both forms come so naturally to children… like my fourth-graders in Lancaster.

I often feel that just about everyone has a few good personal essays in them, if someone can just give them permission to tell the story, to tell it in the very voice they speak with and hear in their heads. Ask them what's unfair. Ask them about their kitchens and neighborhoods. Ask them about their PlayStation or their car. Once they grasp the proposition—that telling stories about their lives is "creative writing," just as much as poetry and fiction, I predict many will embrace it eagerly. And if you have noticed the strength and passion of students' first-person writing compared to the stilted mess you often get when they write academically, this is an assignment you will collect with anticipation, not dread.

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