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Literary/Creative Nonfiction
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Qualities of Creative/Literary Nonfiction, as Described by Editors and Writers of the Genre

In The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers Of/On Creative Nonfiction, co-editors Michael Steinberg and Robert L. Root, Jr. list five elements of creative nonfiction:

1. Personal presence. "Throughout the various forms of creative nonfiction, whether the subject is the writer's self (as perhaps in personal essays and memoirs) or an objective, observed reality outside the self (as perhaps in nature essays and personal cultural criticism), the reader is taken on a journey into the mind and personality of the writer."
2. Self-discovery and self-exploration. "This genre grants writers permission to explore without knowing where they will end up, to be tentative, speculative, reflective....Writers who seem most at home with this genre are those who like to delve and to inquire, to question, to explore, probe, meditate, analyze, turn things over, brood, worry--all of which creative nonfiction allows, even encourages."
3. Flexibility of form. "Part of the excitement of the genre is its openness to creative forms as well as to creative contents, its invitation to experiment and push at boundaries between genres, and its ability to draw on an unlimited range of literary techniques."
4. Veracity. "...creative nonfiction is reliably factual, firmly anchored in real experience, whether the author has lived it or observed and recorded it."
5. Literary approaches to language. "The language of creative nonfiction is as literary, as imaginative, as that of other literary genres and is similarly used for lyrical, narrative, and dramatic effects." ... "The writer's role and the structure of the writing are not as predictable in creative nonfiction as they are in other forms, such as the news article or the academic research paper, the sermon or the lecture. The structure of the essay or article may be experimental or unexpected, an attempt to generate literary form out of subject matter instead of trying to wedge subject matter into an all-purpose literary form."

Phillip Gerard, in his text Creative Nonfiction, lists five characteristics of the genre:

- 1) an apparent subject (the "teaching" element) and a deeper subject (the mind of the writer, process of thought)
- 2) not necessarily "timely," although it might be; tension between the urgency of the event and the timelessness of its meaning
- 3) narrative frame (scenes, action-oriented, character, dialogue)
- 4) reflection; "finished" thought, finally; the sense that it has been percolating
- 5) attention to craft of writing

Lee Gutkind lists several qualities he looks for when choosing pieces for the journal he edits, Creative Nonfiction:

1. Focus, meaning
2. Frame, usually narrative
3. Cinematic, action oriented, usually told in scenes
4. Intimate and knowing detail
5. Inner point of view
6. Magic moment
7. Informational/teaching element. "Over and above the creativity of voice and the quality of the experience being communicated, the reader must be offered something to learn--an idea, a collection of facts, fortified with insight, reflection, and interpretation."

Gutkind adds the importance of:

- strong element of reportage
- well-written prose, rich with detail and told with a distinctive voice
- a compelling, focused narrative, sustained from beginning to end, that is well structured, specific in detail, and which conveys a meaning.

Barbara Lounsberry and Gay Talese, in their introduction to Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality, divide the categories of traditional nonfiction into:

1. lives (diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies)
2. events (histories, journalism)
3. places (travel writing, nature writing, science writing)
4. ideas (essays, including religious and philosophical works)

Then, they go on to give guidelines for literary nonfiction (especially literary journalism):

- 1) Research deeply. The deeper you dig, the more freedom you will find.
- 2) Cultivate close relationships with your subjects over extended periods of time.
- 3) Never invent or change facts or events.
- 4) Avoid the composite portrait. The universal resides in the personal.
5. Accept the challenge of writing with style on the highest literary level**
6. Bring to real people an enlarged sense of their lives.
7. Bring to real events an enlarged sense of their meaning.
8. Have faith in the value and importance of human beings and human events, no matter how small or ignored.

**Some of the techniques of style used by writers of literary nonfiction include scenic construction; simultaneous (ex: Hiroshima), sequential (ex: In Cold Blood), and substitutionary narration (ex: The Executioner's Song); interior monologue; and the artful use of imagery, allusion, and humor.

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