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On nonfiction and consequence

Abstract:
This essay examines contemporary creative nonfiction literature's relationship to actuality, arguing that the actual is as much character as subject in nonfiction literature, a referent necessary to complete the meaning of the work. I define literary nonfiction as a shadowy interpretive realm reliant on the symbiotic relationship between actuality and text. This definition allows room for the composition of emotional truths but also raises questions about the cultural meanings ascribed to, and cultural problems arising from, the narration of crisis memoirs and the public interpretation of the literature of witness. I draw on the thinking of Roland Barthes, John D'Agata, Philip Gerard, Vivian Gornick, Patricia Hampl, Pam Houston, David Lazar, Alyce Miller, David Shields and Susan Sontag, and examine controversies surrounding the work of James Frey and Benjamin Wilkomerski.

Biographical note:
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Keywords:
Creative writing – Nonfiction – Creative nonfiction – Truthiness – Nonfiction narrator

On the artefacts of actuality

One Sunday morning, about a decade ago, I ran into a colleague in a dusty attic of a stranger's home. We were both, independently, estate sale shopping – digging through artefacts of lives recently left behind. The reasons for the departure – death, retirement migration to a Florida beach village, exile to a nursing home – we couldn't know. As is often the case in an estate sale, the attic featured the dregs of household living – old spools of wrapping paper, books with cracked bindings, fabric scraps, board games in bent boxes.

My colleague, another professor of creative nonfiction in the MFA program where I taught then, was pawing through a box of pens or postcards or trinket parts. He shouted out when he saw me, 'Barrie! A creative nonfiction moment!' He was exactly right to name the moment so. The items each of us would take away from this sale would be very different, our personal obsessions and collections as dissimilar as our interpretations of these objects, our writing styles, and our personalities in and beyond faculty meetings. Yet the impulse that brought us to that attic was related – the nonfiction writers' attraction to these curious and concrete found objects as well as the implicit knowledge that each old bottle opener, key ring and souvenir coaster shadowed human life not only as it might have been but also as it actually had been lived.

The shadow of actuality – an interpretive realm reliant on, and distinct from, actuality itself – is the territory of the creative nonfiction writer. I have, many times, told this estate-sale-attic story to my students, to help explain to them the ways creative nonfiction differs from the other literary genres, in an attempt to impress upon them that actuality not only matters when it comes to figuring out the parameters of our writing projects, but that the work we do to render and elucidate actuality is also the point of this kind of literary work.

To this end, I sometimes instruct students to consider their lives metaphorically as part and parcel of a citywide rummage mart. Our job as nonfiction writers seeking to artistically represent and explicate the feel of our own experience, as well as that of the times in which we live, is not to fabricate plots and situations, but rather to select from the breadth of memory, research, and observation already set out for sale. Creative selection, more so than invention, is the province of creative nonfiction. Which of these pre-existing artefacts best leads us to the story I intend to not just relate but also explore? The Elvis clock? The ceramic panther? The red boots that once belonged to a semi-famous singer? We may not know what we are writing or why, we may be reporting or remembering or questioning, but we begin the process by interrogating the meaning of those relics that already exist.

The first and most obvious thing to say about creative nonfiction is that it is nonfictional – about facts, real people and events, the 'true story'. The second, less obvious to anyone new to the creative nonfiction discussion, but undeniably essential to the process of transforming actuality to art, is British memoir and fiction writer V.S. Pritchett's oft-quoted phrase: 'It's all in the art. You get no credit for living' (Barrington 2002: 72). Every fiction writer I've ever met is quick to say that they too write 'the truth,' that in fact they make things up in order to better render the real-yet-

slippery truth that facts might prevent us from seeing clearly. The line between the prose genres can't be merely that of 'truth'. All literature is about some aspect of human life, and seeks to reveal the truth of human living. It's for this reason that I avoid using the word 'truth' when introducing students to the creative nonfiction genre and instead stress the word 'actuality'.

Bearing witness to actuality is in fact the only thing that holds together an immensely diverse category of writing that represents, interprets, and creates impressions of bona fide lives, factual events, and mappable locations. Some claim the genre goes back as far as early Egyptian tomb autobiographies, and includes: the confessions of the early Catholics; the pillow scribblings of Japanese ladies-in-waiting; the personal ruminations of French Renaissance noblemen; the exposés of the muckraking journalists; the personal treatises of historians and politicians; the testimony of former slaves; the autobiographical meditations of renegade intellectuals; the reform agendas of the documentarians; the quests of the travel writers; the activism of the environmentalists. Others argue that creative nonfiction as a literary form emerged, a new genre, in the late 1970s and 1980s, rising like Godzilla out of the murky sea of late 20th century identity movements and political change. I tell my students that the genre includes all of this and more.

The formal strategies and containers of creative nonfiction are, too, at least as diverse as the panoply of items available at an estate sale, and the definition of the form changes according to the writer doing the defining. Shall we call this fact-and-memory-based literature creative nonfiction? Literary nonfiction? Narrative nonfiction? Lyric nonfiction? Does a name pin down the mercurial qualities of prose made out of the narrative, lyric, ruminative, interpretive and investigative strategies of fiction, poetry, memoir, journalism, essay, criticism**,** and drama? And once we decide on the moniker, can we agree on the forms this umbrella genre contains? The memoir? The report? The essay? The lyric essay? Hybrid forms that defy the notions of genre itself?

But all this focus on what the genre is called, how it is shaped, and what sort of chord the work sounds neglects a subtler and less-explored point regarding what marks the genre as something other than what the other genres claim to be. The complex and varied debates concerning how often, if ever, nonfiction writers might fictionalise will never end, nor will the unsolvable arguments regarding particular reader preferences for work that reads more like a story, or argument, or poem, or prayer or song. What doesn't change is the baseline intention of the genre, which is to use language as a way of artistically seeing, interrogating, interpreting, and representing some aspect or version of what really does, or did once, exist in factual time and space.

What this means is that literary nonfiction work may be as much like a documentary photograph as it is like a poem or a short story. We all understand that a photograph of a person, place, or thing is not the same as an actual person, place, or thing. We know that to freeze time changes time, opening the suspended moment to interpretations that are as much about the human mind creating meaning as they are about the person, place or thing itself. We see now, in the age of digital photography more than ever, that photographs are not 'realistic,' and provide no proof of the real.

We comprehend that art photographs are made by human artists who, passively or actively, manipulate time in the service of art. And yet, the photograph could not exist without that which is photographed, which means that actuality and the photographic art object are symbiotic twins. In *Cameral lucida,* the critic Roland Barthes writes:

> A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents) … as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive … In short, the referent adheres (1982: 5–6).

Nonfiction literature is not precisely analogous to documentary photography, and yet something of the essence of nonfiction form echoes between the photograph and nonfiction page. Language cannot recreate a photographic representation of the actual, but a symbiotic relationship exists and is part of what the nonfiction writer attempts in the writing and what the reader who pays attention to literary context ingests from reading. In *On photography* the critic Susan Sontag writes:

> A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture … A photograph – any photograph – seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. Virtuosi of the noble image like Alfred Steiglitz and Paul Strand, composing mighty, unforgettable photographs decade after decade, still want, first of all, to show something 'out there'… While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency (1977: 5–6).

Sontag goes on to discuss the ways the creative process of the photo artist influences the images she or he creates, which means human attachment to the apparent veracity of the photograph is an imaginary or unreal relationship to the past, but also unavoidable in her analysis is an awareness of the photograph's link to both the actuality and the technology that made the image possible.

When applying such theorising to creative nonfiction I come to my notion of creative nonfiction as a shadow form. If fiction, poetry, and paintings are themselves mimetic interpretations, an imitation of life, and photography offers the distorted accuracy of the mirror, then creative nonfiction literature is somewhere in the middle – both reflection and interpretation, reliant on, but mechanistically distinct from, the actuality the form represents. A shadow cannot exist without the body that casts the shadow, and one might experience the shadow without experiencing the body, but denying the body is tantamount to an imaginary experience of the shadow.

And yet, the shadow is a difficult image, hard to comprehend because it is only partially concrete. This is why the oft-quoted maxim that the nonfiction writer or

memoirist has a 'contract' with the reader, and therefore must always adhere to the literal truth, may be, in too many cases, an overstatement which avoids the invention and shadowy manipulation inherent to even the most faithfully reportorial creative processes. On the other hand, the phrase 'emotional truth', the usual first defence against challenges of over-fabrication, may be too wilfully vague to provide much guidance.

More useful may be an awareness of the ways every scene, rumination and inscription shadows the inherent actuality of the nonfiction writer's subjects – the literary work, if not a twin or reflection of the actual, is then at least a shadow without which our pages lose the relationship to the original mass that allows the art form to exist. This symbiosis is not machine made, as in a photograph, so therefore, as an art object, the essay or memoir is not mechanically dependent on its referent, but still requires the existence of that referent to complete its meaning.

The shadow is what concerns me here. Whether a nonfiction work is made of literal facts or the more diffuse shades of impression, emotion, and interpretation will depend on the subject and the artist's approach to the subject, as long as something of the referent itself retains presence and integrity within the work. Fiction and poetry may too possess an actual referent, but are not dependent upon that referent. The other genres are not, by definition, an attempt to render both the experience of the referent itself and the actuality – the this-really-happened-ness of that referent – but such is the case in well-executed literary nonfiction. The author may spin, speculate, even sometimes invent in the service of greater understanding, but if our subjects cast no nonfictional shadow they can no longer claim the body of actuality, and thus have lost their nonfictional substance.

This is a determination that often leads my students – particularly those who have not, or have not yet, fallen in love with the possibilities of creative nonfiction – to cry out against genre labels. Why not stop worrying about the lines between the genres and just refer to all prose as 'story', or 'narrative', or the even more imprecise 'work?' Such is a fair question, considering all the ways nonfiction appears, by virtue of its name, to be merely *not* fiction. And genre ambiguity is a fair manoeuvre for any literary artist seeking to create a work critical of, or unbound by, category. Then again, humans have always been drawn to category and artists have long thrived on the opportunity to take part in the evolution of a burgeoning creative identity. As in the case of human life, categorisation limits, but also, because of the reinvention that comes of naming, can lead to deeper varieties of identity. Once we are aware of the ways that creative nonfiction is this-but-not-that, we have opportunity to focus, to make the work of any genre category more resonant.

Furthermore, mere fictitiousness does not transform sentences into the genre of fiction. That which makes a work fiction or poetry is dependent on the qualities that fiction writers and poets use to define fiction and poetry and thus becomes a matter for those genres to decide, but I will suggest here that the purpose and intention of each genre is what defines that genre, not a work's non-status in some other realm.

To go back then to that estate sale attic, the purpose of nonfiction literature is to make use of the verb form of the word 'essay', which is to attempt or try – by which I mean

to artfully document, to bear witness, to employ language in the service of memory, to interpret and illuminate the lyric of actuality – those suspended creative nonfiction moments, where the times of human lives are both coated with the dust of history and beating forward into the minutes to come.

On truthiness and memoir fraud

I had my moment of explanatory insight about the so-called memoir work of James Frey while watching a DVD of a contemporary Hollywood thriller. The movie had all the requisite elements of a big box office hit: A contained setting. A life-and-death emergency. A power struggle involving members of the Mafia. Male triumph over adversity by virtue of unrelenting toughness and ability to bear excruciating pain. Plot advancement built on stylised violence. Female virtue as exemplified by a beleaguered-yet-sweet victim whose nature is essentially unimpaired by drug addiction, prostitution, and brutality. A male hero who seems to be a monster but turns out be the taciturn knight-in-shining-armour who rescues women while relinquishing personal gain.

I was thinking about the American fascination – in cinema and in politics – with this variety of hero narrative, a style of mythmaking so compelling, and yet so false when applied to actual human life. That's when I remembered that James Frey was an unsuccessful screenwriter before he was a 'memoirist'.

When the James Frey/Oprah controversy hit the media in 2006 I was as riveted as any other contemporary nonfiction writer by the unfolding extra-textual drama. How would our beleaguered and chronically misunderstood genre play out on the small screen, in the realms of Larry King and Oprah Winfrey?

I was, perhaps inevitably, disappointed. I felt a bit bad for Frey; who would want to be yelled at on TV by Oprah, the same Oprah who had been so recently such a good and gushing friend? But aside from the media spectacle – whether an unfair set-up or deserved comeuppance – I found the discussion too literal, too focused on did-you-lie-about-this-this-this, as if memory itself were a form of newspaper journalism. I will admit to raving, at the TV screen, words something like the list that follows.

Why wasn't anyone – the author, the publisher, the TV book club maven – talking about the potential of literary nonfiction to do more than, as Oprah first introduced Frey's book, keep us up all night turning the pages?

Why doesn't someone speak to the shadow location of memoir – between the landscapes of the novel and the documentary – making the form therefore capable of both translating experience into story and leading people, readers, to look, without turning away, at aspects of actual human experience previously hidden to them?

Why wasn't anyone bringing up the ways asking questions, in narrative and lyric forms, about human experience might contribute to the kind of world we make for ourselves? Oprah loves to talk about human redemption – so why not lead us into a conversation of the ways memory is political, the ways making meaning of our memories might help us make better ways to live?

Of course, at that point, I hadn't yet read the book.

Since reading *A million little pieces* (Frey 2004) I do see why many readers find gripping the present-tense voice, the passages of linguistically terse scene, and the forward movement of dramatic action – though the book could have been edited down to significantly less than its 400-plus pages without compromising these aspects. Yet with the text in hand my questions became more pointed – such as why didn't Oprah, not to mention the rest of the reading public who bought this book, many of whom claimed it saved their lives, notice its obvious and mundane fabrications? Have we so lost hold of the line between entertainment and our real lives that as a people we confuse the mythical plots of Hollywood adventure thrillers with actuality?

I have myself spent going-on 20 years in AA, and have heard, in those rooms, every kind of drunk-a-log imaginable. The stories real-people-without-book-contracts tell in order to save themselves are tragic, funny, violent, extreme, embarrassing, ugly, disgusting, brave and sometimes even kind of holy. Many people involved in 12-step recovery modes – like Frey's narrator – have trouble with or even out-and-out reject, conventional notions of 'God', and therefore turn to the group, to human community, as their 'higher power'. (Replacing 'the group' with God is standard operating advice for the atheist AA member.)

One of the primary narrative lines of *A million little pieces* is the narrator's apparently uncompromising refusal of the 12-step modality. When Frey's publishers described the book as a 'different' sort of rehab story, this refusal is, in part, what they referred to. But even this aspect of the story is not what it appears to be.

Plenty of smart, earnest thinkers and writers inside and outside of AA communities have asked hard questions of the stock AA template, and 'rational recovery' models that eschew the Christian foundations of AA are not hard to find. Frey is far from the first, and hardly the most eloquent or in-depth critic of AA, despite his narrator's repeated protestations to the contrary, so it's hard not to critique the hubris of this aspect of the book. Furthermore, when I say that even the oft-reported 'difference' of *A million little pieces* may not be what it seems, what I mean is this: attention to the narrative arc of this book reveals the narrator does in fact walk a fairly conventional AA path – except that he replaces the 12 steps with the Tao and replaces a formal notion of God with his community of rehab comrades. That James Frey was really a drunk and really did sober up using the AA model may be the only actuality of his so-called new-kind-of-recovery-memoir.

I share my personal lens on this story here because I wish to point out that what disturbs me most about *A million little pieces* are not the out-and-out falsifications first documented by *The smoking gun* (2006) but rather the more pernicious fiction of the project, which is the author's portrayal of himself as a one-of-a-kind-Hollywood-esque maverick hero, knight, rescuer, tough-guy angel who triumphs over adversity through sheer strength of will. Perhaps humans need some version of the gritty convention-snubbing hero's journey to serve as metaphorical template for living; perhaps these explanatory myths are the reason action thrillers are such box office windfalls; perhaps humans need the simplified arc and narrative release of all the Hollywood formulas, from old Humphrey Bogart flicks to superhero animation. But

we are bound to run into trouble if we proceed to claim these stories are actual, or that our lives really operate in this manner.

Is the Frey story a good case study for the ongoing nonfiction truthiness conversation – which far predates *A million little pieces* – or a particularly American media anomaly that distracts us from more useful examples? The contemporary debates among American writers about all manner of facts, fabrication and creative nonfiction writing may have begun twenty years prior, with the publication of memoirist Patricia Hampl's craft essay 'Memory and imagination', first published in *The dolphin reader* in 1986, in which she shares an incomplete narrative about a Catholic school piano teacher, Sister Olive, who teaches her to find middle C and sneezes in the sun. After starting to tell us the story Hampl pauses and goes on instead to analyse what she did and did not make-up in the previous passage. Yet she still contends she is writing memoir, not fiction. 'I am forced to admit that memory is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures. I must admit that I invented. But why?' (Hampl 2000: 26).

While Hampl never published the Sister Olive story outside of this essay, and while the author never really states where she stands regarding the uses of invented memories in completed memoirs, the piece has long been cited as a demonstration of the link between fabrication and the imaginative creative process. 'It still comes as a shock,' Hampl writes, 'to realise that I don't write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know' (27).

But Hampl was hardly first to explore the issue of truth in nonfiction. In his essay 'Of the force of the imagination' Michel de Montaigne, 16th century originator of the personal essay form, wrote:

> In the examples which I here bring in, of what I have heard, read, done, or said, I have forbidden myself to dare to alter even the most light and indifferent circumstances: my conscience does not falsify one tittle; what my ignorance may do, I cannot say' (cited in Lazar 2009: xi).

Mid 20th century author Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a catholic girlhood* (1957) – published closer to the present day than Montaigne, but still decades before the contemporary conversation – is a book of narrative accounts of her childhood and adolescence interspersed with postscripts in which she made note of all the points where she had guessed, stretched or even lied for the sake of a better story. And published at the start of this century, half a dozen years before the Frey-mania, was essayist Lauren Slater's *Lying, a metaphorical memoir* (2000), a book which intentionally leaves the reader wondering when the narrator is telling the literal truth and when she speaks in narrative metaphor. The questions we ask today have always been a part of the nonfiction writer's project, even before creative nonfiction was spoken of as a literary genre.

Hampl, who references McCarthy frequently in her writings about the memoir writing, published her breakthrough memoir *A romantic education* (1981) just a few years before creative nonfiction began being commonly taught as a literary art form in American universities. When I was a student at the University of Minnesota in the late 1980s working on a degree in creative writing (Hampl was one of my teachers) I

found myself in some of the earliest creative nonfiction workshops in America. Many of us in those classrooms felt we were inventing the form from scratch. (Though, of course, were we not. It was only the names of things that had truly changed.) We also all experimented with that fact-invention line in our work, eventually finding a comfort zone that fit the nature of our form and content. Since that time Hampl's much-anthologised essay has become a staple in the American creative nonfiction classroom.

Meanwhile, the debate detonated, and in 2013 is still the subject of packed panel sessions at such American creative writing confluences as the annual Associated Writing Programs Conference and biannual NonfictioNow Conference, the discussion often split between literary journalists on one side demanding complete allegiance to provable fact, and the literary memoirists on the other side arguing for the memoir as an autobiographical lyric form with allegiance to what many have come to call emotional memory – and with countless writers falling somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

Today these debates frequently reference Frey, as well as the ethics of truth-telling in the American political realm, but before the high profile James Frey events of 2006 the reference points for these debates were discredited journalists such as Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair who'd fabricated portions of articles in journalistic venues such as *Harpers* and the *New York Times*. In response to these and other newspaper-related scandals, American nonfiction writers from the journalistic side of the spectrum made pronouncements such as this by Lee Gutkind, the editor of *Creative nonfiction,* the first literary magazine devoted solely to nonfiction writing:

> Wherever you draw the line between fiction and nonfiction, remember the basic rules of good citizenship: *Do not* re-create incidents and characters who never existed; *do not* write to do harm to innocent victims; *do not* forget your own story, but while considering your struggle and the heights of your achievements, think repeatedly about how your story will affect and relate to your reader [emphasis added] (2004).

At around the same time the work of memoirist and essayist Vivian Gornick came under fire when she stated, in a Q&A with creative nonfiction MFA students at Goucher College in Baltimore, that she'd created composite scenes and characters in her memoir *Fierce attachments*. The event was subsequently described in an article written by one of the MFA students present, published in the influential American online arts magazine *Salon* (Sterling 2003). In a response that ran in the same journal a week later Gornick made a clear distinction between memoir and journalism:

> A memoir is a tale taken from life – that is from actual, not imagined, occurrences – related by a first person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements, it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story – to shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader. What actually happened is only raw material; what the writer makes of what happened is all that matters (Gornick 2003).

Then came James Frey, who changed the American discussion, in part because of the growing commercial popularity of memoirs and in part because *A million little Pieces* was chosen by Oprah for her prestigious and lucrative national television book club,

and as with many writers during the heyday of that book club of book clubs, the experience of being 'Oprahed' made him famous. When *The smoking gun* (2006) released their expose of Frey's fabrications he was already a bestselling author. His subsequent appearances – in which he attempted to defend himself and his book on both Oprah's widely popular afternoon talk show and on prime time CNN's Larry King Live – may have been personally humiliating for the author, but made him both a household name and the new benchmark for discussion and debate about questions of the ethics of factuality in creative nonfiction writing.

Since that time the discussion has broadened and become more nuanced, but the problems on the table are no closer to being solved. John D'Agata claims in *The lifespan of a fact*, his book-length argument with his fact checker, that fudging facts for artful effect is the job of the literary essayist (Kois 2012) and David Shields in *Reality hunger*, his compendium of quotations, appropriations and essaylets, writes that Americans seem to want two opposing things – the drama of fabricated narrative and the stability of fact:

> Oh how we Americans gnash our teeth in bitter anger when we discover that the riveting truth that also played like a Sunday matinee was actually just a Sunday matinee … I don't want to defend Frey per se – he's a terrible writer – but the nearly pornographic obsession with his and similar cases reveals … the culture being embarrassed at how much it wants the frame of reality and, within that frame, great drama (2010: 31–3).

Literary journalists such as Philip Gerard have attempted to look beyond Frey, at the subtle long-term consequences of even tiny untruths:

> If you begin by fudging facts, you've already drifted one degree off true. Like a ship with a minor compass error, the farther you travel, the farther out of true your story becomes, and after you've travelled far enough you are miles away from the true course … Events have a past, a prelude, just as history has a future. There is truthfulness and there is truthiness, comedian Stephen Colbert's term for *faux* 'facts' that only seem to be true, that we would like to be true but that simply aren't, that are repeated so often they become a lie to our advantage. When you sign your name to a by-line, you're claiming you know the difference (2008).

Memoirist and fiction writer Pam Houston, on the other hand, revels in what she sees as the beautifully blurry line between autobiographical fiction and narrative memoir. In her segmented craft essay 'Corn maze', in which she identifies herself as James Frey's undergraduate creative writing teacher, Houston states that all her work, whether labelled fiction or memoir, comes in at about 82 per cent factual.

> When it was decided (when again, and by whom) that we were all supposed to choose between fiction and nonfiction, what was not taken into account was that for some of us truth can never be an absolute, that there can at best, be only less true and more true and sometimes those two collapse inside each other like a Turducken. Given the failure of memory. Given the failure of language to mean. Given metaphor. Given metonymy. Given the ever-shifting junction of code and context. Given the twenty-five people who saw the same car accident. Given our denial. Given our longings (2012).

In her article 'Real fakes and inauthentic others' novelist and critic Alyce Miller takes the conversation further by discussing Frey's work in the context of reader complicity in the long history of memoir frauds and hoaxes, raising the bar on the questions we ask of both nonfiction as a literary genre and genre itself:

> On a theoretical level, can we say, well, all writing is a 'deception'. And every book is a cultural event, that 'I' is always a rhetorical construction, and never stable or exclusive, and therefore cannot signify some coherent notion of 'self', and thereby excuse the deceit? Or do we support the right of writers to do whatever they choose (leave it up to the writer to fail or succeed) and acknowledge that the very act of writing in itself is a transformation? Do we solve any 'problems' by simply reassigning the book to another category? Or, finally, do we shake our heads in visceral disgust and disappointment because we wanted the 'genuine articles', and what we got was an imitation? (2009: 25–6).

And finally, essayist David Lazar, in the introduction to his anthology *Truth in nonfiction*, implores us to shift our focus when considering memory-based narratives:

> Lies, the deception of the reader through the creation of false experience, have been the rallying cry that has caused readers and most critics to gather their pitchforks and torches in search of the monsters of deceptions whose experience they have taken as 'real.' But there are other kinds of falsehoods that seem to me as or more important: Marks of self-deception in writers of nonfiction, forms of psychological manipulation, the drawing of conclusions, and epiphanies that seem laboured, unworthy, unbelievable, false. However, these same falsehoods can be useful if the writer of essays or memoir can catch herself or himself in the act, displaying the insight and ability to self-correct that is among the rare pleasures of different forms of memory writing (2008: x).

It is the self-deception, manipulation, and false epiphanies of *A million little pieces* that disturb me most about Frey's book, which never directly catches itself in the act by commenting on the operative difficulty of mapping the route between living and living-to-tell-the tale. He denies the body of his actual experience and does not critique the chimera he leaves in that body's place. It may be that there is a role for mythmaking on the pages of creative nonfiction, but if this is the case then such a narrative asks us to take advantage of its uneasy relationship to actuality and lead us into the understanding that fabrication is part of the point of the story. This omission seems particularly problematic when a book's subject is how-I-stopped-lying-to-myself-and-others-and-got-sober.

The presence of actual experience matters here *not* because of any unassailable rule regarding whether or not we nonfiction writers are allowed to make things up and *not* because we are compelled to choose a genre and stick to it, with no slip-sliding between. The problem here is that Frey's memoir casts no shadow. If we refuse to accept credit for living and hold out for making good art from the raw materials of experience then we can't claim the value of our work comes simply from the fact that the stories we tell actually happened. However, if we choose to ignore the no-credit-for-living tenet and pursue what value readers might grant us for simply living to tell some compelling crisis tale, but then dishonour that value by sentimentalizing or

mythologizing or even inventing significant experience, then it's not literature – good or bad, commercial or artful – that we're making but rather just an elaborate and deeply manipulative shell game.

Trying to have it both ways, Frey said – after the media blow-up – that he was not interested in the conventions of genre (Peretz 2008) but it's hard to see the value in work that defies convention without also intelligently engaging in what that transgression might mean. Furthermore, Frey's free-the-genre claims are disingenuous, considering how well he cashed in on his now-abandoned claims that his story really did happen this way.

I read *A million little pieces* as a not very good book by a writer showing signs of being capable of more, and a commercial project that made its mark through several profitable ethics violations. First, Frey violated the ethics of recovery, proffering a false path to redemption, promising, particularly in his public appearances outside the fourth wall of his book, that his own recovery really happened the way he wrote the story. Second, he violated the ethics of genre transgression by stating, repeatedly and publicly that he had written the literal truth, only playing the genre-busting card late in the game, after his lies had been exposed, and never in the text of the book itself. I can't say whether Frey is a con artist or just an arrogant and intellectually lazy writer who went along with a goldmine publishing debut most unknown writers would, admittedly, have a hard time turning down. I can say that his book is not the most substantive or interesting to use as the cornerstone for our understanding of the role of invention in memoir, but it's hard to get away from the ballyhoo trail Frey-mania left in our media-saturated consciousness. Whatever else the literary memoirists and essayists thought while watching Frey squirm in Oprah's hot seat – so accustomed are we to being absent in popular culture – I can't be the only one who said to herself 'Look – creative nonfiction is on TV!'

Eight years before the Frey debacle another incident of memoir fraud made international news that, while even more problematic than *A million little pieces*, offers a broader way to understand why nonfiction writers are so frequently confounded by these truthiness debates, particularly as they pertain to the crisis memoir. The book I refer to is *Fragments* by Binjamin Wilkomirski. When reports first broke exposing the critically acclaimed Holocaust memoir (Maechler 2001) as a fake – revealing Wilkomirski (née Bruno Grosjean) to be not Jewish and not a Holocaust survivor but an adopted Christian who never left Switzerland during WWII – journalists pegged the so-called Wilkomirski as an unscrupulous con artist.

Further investigation reveals that Wilkomirski's one-and-only book – apparently the product, in part, of inaccurate, therapy-induced 'recovered memories' – may speak to much larger questions of contemporary literature and publishing, such as: What is memory? What is literary art making? What is creative suggestion? How much do we value art making compared to what we imagine to be the inherent 'bravery' of the historically significant victim? And what is the lure – personally and culturally – of the 'victim identity'? How might these questions be related to decisions and critical judgments both publishers and readers make in regard to all memoirs of crisis, recovery, and redemption?

When Wilkomirski's literary agency hired an independent historian, Stefan Maechler, to investigate the origins of both the author and his so-called memoir, Maechler found not only irrefutable evidence that the memoir was a fake but also a complex story of a man in search of a narrative to explain his own absences and indistinct post-traumatic injuries, and thus eager to accept as proof what more self-aware writers might understand as metaphor. When Wilkomirski published *Fragments* he found a reading public eager to make an apparent victim of unspeakable history an object of cultural fetish, investing talismanic and redemptive power into a text and onto the author of a text that – while clearly a worthy artistic artefact on its own accord – gained enormous authority by announcing itself as fact (297–300).

Essayist and critic Phillip Lopate has described the contemporary crisis memoir as a banal 'staging of vignette about wound and redemption through compassionate insight' (2007: 310). Lopate's critique suggests another way to look at the *Fragments* saga. In the case of James Frey, much has been made of the culpability of the author, the publisher, and Oprah, but what of trauma survival narrative forms in general? Should we put the crisis memoir itself on trial? Do we want so badly to believe in the redemption tale that we consistently miss the larger and more diffuse narratives that actually do speak back to the goals of the nonfiction arts, which are, by definition, forms meant to grapple with the world as it actually exists? In *The Wilkomirski affair* (which includes the only full text of *Fragments* currently in print) Maechler writes:

> As a person who had never felt he belonged [Wilkomirski] now found entry into a community of victims who held him on occasion in the highest esteem. What was more, his whims or blunders in concrete, everyday life were now obviously excused by his former suffering. The most important gain however was that he had found a meaningful story for an inexplicable and inaccessible past. The dark side of the metamorphosis was that he lost himself in the role written for him. … Videotapes and eyewitness reports of Wilkomirski's presentations give the impression of a man made euphoric by his own narrative … Perhaps he did not really believe his story, but he did believe his own telling of it. Anything that had such an effect on listeners must be true. The glow in their eyes lent him a living, coherent identity – that of the greatest of all victims – and gave his story overwhelming authenticity. Without an audience there would be no Wilkomirski (272–3).

Such confusion of memory and metaphor suggests that any memoir granting authority to the speaker on the basis of that speaker's perceived injury – whether or not the injury is valid – does in the long run subvert the real power of ethical and artful nonfiction forms to reveal and excavate actuality. When publishers play the 'real story' card, wilfully profiting from memoir fraud, they perpetuate a system of rewarding injury and over-simplifying human experience. If we allow creative nonfiction to sentimentalise victimhood we cease to understand the complexity of both victims and perpetrators, thus perpetuate oppression, and allow greater cultural space for abuse of power.

The genre boundary questions posed by memoir fraud debates may have little to do with the choices writers make in the heat of composition, which really, no matter what any of us promise is our line in the sand at any time, do change tremendously

depending on the project. Literature, and all artistic expression, must be more flexible than any simple rule. But in the book promotion realm, beyond books themselves, when an author becomes confused or needlessly sneaky about what she or he does or does not fabricate – when the author obfuscates this issue for reasons beyond that of the workings of the text itself – then the whole nonfictional project becomes skewed.

Even if we do agree that a certain level of narrative embellishment is necessary for any memoir – wherever any of us draw our truthiness line – we still need to ask: What do writers mean when they claim to write 'emotional truth'? It's one thing to fabricate in order to close memory holes and convey the ineffable feeling/impression of experience, quite another to create a sense of truth that is read a certain way because it's called 'a real story' but which is, in fact, not a real story at all.

Does it matter whether Frey's emotional truth feels, to him, like his truth about the experience of addiction recovery? Does it matter that Wilkomirksi's emotional truth is, apparently, metaphor for some personal and inexpressible grief that feels to him like the happening of the Holocaust, even if the Holocaust never actually happened to him? Might this be the juncture where seeming true and being true really matter? I think so. A bestselling book that portrays the myth of human experience rather than experience itself, then claims that myth as actuality, is socially dangerous.

This is tricky territory where the text and the world around the text are connected in ways that reach far beyond marketing categories. In the actual world beyond books both Frey and Wilkomirski claimed their personae as literal autobiography – therefore granting themselves the wrong kind of authority. This is where the shadow role of nonfiction literature becomes distorted. While all nonfiction must rely on an actual referent, the artist cannot allow the referent to subsume the reference. The reference is the art, the made thing, the shadow. When the object subsumes the shadow we are left with no art, just an unmediated mass.

Regardless of the large role publishers play in the marketing of any commercially successful book, we have a cultural problem when authors grant themselves (or when the media, or readers, grant an author) authority based on perceived actual life struggle and redemption, rather than on the authority of having made a work of art. Not only are we then doing away with the significance of art, and gutting the transformative power of art making, we are trivializing human trauma by sentimentalising struggle. To sentimentalise is to reduce a subject to a broad surface, removing the complex, ironic and often unpretty, unbrave, unheroic underpinnings and interpretations that mark actual experience. When we sentimentalise human trauma and struggle we doom ourselves to perpetual personal and cultural confusion. When we sentimentalise history we doom ourselves to a regressive rather than progressive world order.

Which leads me back to that link between nonfiction literature and actuality – not just whether the stories authors tell us are actually real – because we know in the case of Frey and Wilkomirski they aren't – but also whether we, as readers, too often allow the *This is a real story* label to unduly influence how we judge the quality and worth of a memoir. The precise actuality of a personal narrative matters when small or large issues of human consequence and history are at stake. Therefore the veracity of, say, a

red sweater or the actual presence or absence of a pet cat may be a matter of authorial preference and sensibility, but the purportedly factual account of surviving rehab that turns out to be a lie could influence the success or failure of what for many is, for instance, the life-or-death choice to turn themselves over to chemical dependency treatment. The consequences of lying about history should be self-evident, the least being that the literary witness of any era must be equal to the demands that era makes on its citizens, lest the populace be unprepared for life that presents itself to our decision-making and judgment.

But this, of course, assumes that literature is still culturally important and that the role we play as makers of literature, particularly nonfiction literature, matters. I'd like to think the work does matter to the intellectual, spiritual, and transformative workings of the messy world creative nonfiction seeks to render, express, convey. If such is the case, then the creative nonfiction writer's job is not to mimic the Hollywood action film arc, but instead to reside in the unexplored recesses of the hero's shadow.

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