Queensland University of Technology

Donna Lee Brien

Creative Nonfiction 2: A virtual conversation with Michael Steinberg

The following is extracted from email conversations and the author's publications as detailed in the references at the end of this article. (See Appendix)

Michael Steinberg, MFA (Creative Writing) Western Michigan University; PhD (American Literature) Michigan State University (MSU), taught writing and creative writing at Michigan State University for more than twenty-five years, before becoming the founding editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, a national biannual literary journal which was launched in Spring 1998. Steinberg's publications include essays, memoirs, feature articles, plays and poems. His essays have been cited in *Best American Essays* (1995 and 1999) and *Best American Sports Writing* (1995), and he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1997 and 2000. Currently revising his *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (with Robert L. Root, 1998) for a second edition, his memoir, *Still Pitching: Innings From a Life With Baseball*, will be published in 2002 by the Michigan State University Press.

DLB. How do you define Creative Nonfiction? How does this differ from traditional nonfiction writing, from journalism and especially from the feature article?

MS. Where the feature article, first-person column, or work of investigative journalism are centred in subject matter or topic, literary or 'creative' nonfiction is centred primarily in the writer's thoughts, feelings and reflections. To elaborate, I see creative nonfiction as a spectrum that encompasses the personal essay, literary journalism, and the personal critical essay. I'd say that, for the most part, the personal essay and memoir are self-expressive and exploratory, while literary journalism and personal criticism rely more heavily on reportage and analysis. This doesn't mean that essays and memoirs do not include reportage and analysis, or that literary journalism and personal critical essays will not wrestle with matters of self. They do. As the cultural critic and memoirist Marianna Torgovnick says, the best personal writing is often governed by 'some strongly felt experience, deeply held conviction, long term interest, or problem that has irritated the mind'.

That said, there are creative nonfiction 'manuals' that identify the genre as equivalent to literary journalism. Such books place little emphasis on the personal, autobiographical and 'literary' impulses that generate much of the writing that I call creative nonfiction. I think the genre is much more inclusive and elastic than many literary journalists will admit. In the Introduction to *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (1998), Robert Root and I claimed that

> creative nonfiction encompasses a broad spectrum of styles sensibilities and forms, but its writers share a common desire to speak in a singular voice as active participants in their own experience. This impulse often overlaps the writer's need to mediate that experience by serving as a

> witness/correspondent, therefore creating a synergy that is unique to this form.

Finally, the genesis of creative nonfiction goes back further than fiction; Montaigne was writing the personal essay in the sixteenth century. Until recently, however, literary nonfiction was not as esteemed as fiction or poetry - for centuries, the essay was a kind of literary stepchild. But if you look at the history of the essay and at writers in our own century, you'll see that personal essays are more and more being considered as a legitimate literary form. In other words, 'the fourth genre'. It's true, critics of the form have said that creative nonfiction is a passing fad. Clearly, the genre is finally getting its due right now - witness the fact that literary memoirs like *Angela's Ashes* and *The Liar's Club* were at the top of the bestseller list for many, many months.(1) But, once creative nonfiction moves out of the spotlight - and it most certainly will - it will still remain a permanent part of the literary canon.

DLB. In that same anthology, you had a particularly elegant definition of the term which came from the teaching of writing.

MS. In the Preface to that book, we wrote that

> creative nonfiction binds together the three different strains in most American English departments: literature, creative writing and composition. Traditionally, the study of literature in American universities has concentrated on analysis and interpretation of three genres: poetry, fiction and drama. Studies of creative writing also concentrated on these genres, with composition becoming the domain of nonfiction. We believe this separation is unnatural, and can be bridged by acknowledging creative nonfiction as a fourth genre.

Moreover, we see creative nonfiction simultaneously 'as a form of literature, as a goal of creative writing, and as the aesthetic impulse in composition'. In the book we refer to creative or literary nonfiction as the fourth genre 'as a way of reminding readers that literary genres are not limited to three; we certainly do not intend the term to indicate the ranking of the genres but rather to indicate their equality'.

In the Introduction to *The Fourth Genre*, we also wrote that creative nonfiction was

> located on a series of intersecting lines connecting the poles of the personal and public, the diary and the report, the informal and formal, the marginalia and the academic article, the imaginative and the expository...

It would be fair to say then that creative nonfiction centres in the essay but continually strains against the boundaries of other genres, endeavouring to expand its own space.

Both Bob Root and I agree that while creative nonfiction is broad and inclusive, we believe the fourth genre's identity is more connected to the spirit of Montaigne's work than it is to matters of subject, reportage and/or scholarly research. Montaigne's essays were first and foremost intimate and personal, and he actively cultivated self-exploration and self-discovery. As such, his writings express the digressions, meanderings, meditations, ruminations and speculations that characterise a singular, idiosyncratic mind at work.

DLB. Does that last statement mean you think the style of creative nonfiction is its most important element, that style is more central than content?

MS. I am not sure if style is it. It's more a matter of writerly intent or purpose. I like the following quote by Phillip Lopate:

> The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue - a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship.

DLB. There are common elements to all creative nonfiction?

MS. Yes, I think so. Again in the Introduction to *The Fourth Genre*, we say that

> Despite all the elusiveness and malleability of the genre and the variety of its shapes, structures and attitudes, works of creative nonfiction share a number of common elements, although they may not all be present all the time in uniform proportions. The most pronounced of these are personal presence and voice, self-discovery and self-exploration, veracity, flexibility of form, and (the skillful use of) literary language.

It's the emphasis on those first two though - personal presence and voice, and self-discovery and self-exploration - that separate our views on the genre from those of the literary journalists.

DLB. As a still-evolving genre - at least in terms of definition - the boundaries between the sub-genres and forms are fluid. And these boundaries are complicated by the way individual creative nonfiction writers consciously merge narrative techniques in their pieces.

MS. Yes, the boundaries between sub-genres are elastic and fluid. This is because writers often braid narrative telling with fictional and poetic techniques and combine portraiture and self-reflection with reportage and critical analysis. This means that the style, focus and structure of each work of creative nonfiction may vary from others. A particular piece, for example, might by turns be lyrical, expository, meditative, informational, reflective, self-interrogative, exploratory, analytical, and/or whimsical. Moreover, a work's structure might take the form of a traditional linear narrative, or the writer may devise a more disjunctive or segmented shape.

I also like the idea that this emerging genre is being debated and defined by those of us who are writing and scrutinising it, instead of by literary critics who are staking out academic territory. This ongoing conversation among the writers is partly what is keeping the genre vital and expansive.

DLB. With what ultimate aim?

MS. As someone who writes essays and memoirs, I believe there's an active desire on the writer's part to explore and discover, as well as a commitment to veracity, structure, and the skilful use of literary language. Nonfictionists may write to establish or define an identity, to explore and chronicle personal discoveries and changes, to examine personal conflicts, to interrogate their opinions, and/or connect themselves to a larger legacy and community. But present in the narrative is a strong authorial presence and a distinctive personal voice.

DLB. There is the danger that this first person subjective voice can easily become narcissistic or unpleasantly egocentric in its self focus.

MS. I agree, but that danger can apply just as well to poets and fiction writers who use the first person subjective voice. It's how the writer uses that voice that determines if a piece is narcissistic or if it extends outward to others. Ideally, when we write essays and memoirs, we're hoping to connect with others who may (or may not) have had the same experience as we've had. As Patricia Hampl says, 'You give me your story, I get mine'.(2) On this issue, the essayist/memoirist Rebecca McClanahan offers the following:

> One of the questions I ask myself before I share a piece of writing is, Why would anyone want to read this? Another way to phrase the question is: Who Cares? Who cares about the character in my story? Who cares about my uncle's death? Why would anyone be interested in reading about the homeless shelter where I worked as a volunteer? Moving from private I to public eye is partly a matter of finding the universal within the particular. Yes, a reader might be interested in reading about your personal journey, or the journey of your characters, but he's also interested in his own journey. What can a reader learn about his own fears, desires, and passions through reading about yours? What can he extract from your work which he can apply to his own life? What 'shareable idea' does your piece offer? The term 'shareable idea' suggests looking to the question beneath the event and trying to locate the central issue within the narrative. Let's say that you've written about the day your son left for college. You want to share the piece, but you're wondering whether anyone would be interested in your story. One way to test the work is to ask yourself what else is going on in the piece besides just a reporting of personal events.(3)

As McClanahan suggests, the writer's personal story is often less important than the larger meaning he/she discovers (hopefully) in the process of writing it. When we write creative nonfiction, we're often using our lives as raw material or as catalysts to help us 'fashion a text' (Annie Dillard's very apt phrase). By this I mean that if an essay/memoir is crafted with careful attention to language, detail, and form, it's striving to become a literary work rather than a direct confession or retelling of one's own personal story. Whether a piece of creative nonfiction succeeds or fails then, has a great deal to do with the writer's skill and ability to shape his/her experience into a satisfying artistic whole. To that end, the employment of a first-person subjective voice is one of the most powerful literary devices that creative nonfiction writers can use.

DLB. What about when the piece moves beyond the self to write about other real people?

MS. That's an ethical issue, and each writer has to come to terms with it for him/herself. My feeling is that the writer has license to write his/her version of the truth, as it serves the work's intent, veracity, and aesthetic. In the end though, it's still not 'the Truth'. Only one writer's version of the truth.

DLB. What connection, then, does this form of writing have to historical fact?

MS. The relationship of personal nonfiction to the historical event depends largely on the kind of piece that is being written, and on the intent that governs a particular piece. Someone who writes a literary memoir, for example, is by necessity examining issues of self

and identity. And so the writer must rely largely on memory and imagination. But someone who writes literary journalism is more of a witness and/or reporter - therefore, the accuracy of historical facts are much more significant. Let me say it another way. Memoirists and personal essayists are often trying to uncover an 'emotional' or 'aesthetic' truth; literary journalists are mainly attempting to render what Philip Gerard calls 'the truth of event'. Both are exploring different truths. Consequently, each writer makes a different contract with him/herself and with their readers.

DLB. But veracity is definitively one of the hallmarks of creative nonfiction?

MS. Veracity is creative nonfiction's defining feature. Creative nonfiction should be reliably factual, firmly anchored in real experience, whether the author has lived it or observed and recorded it. As Annie Dillard asserts:

> The elements in any nonfiction should be true not only artistically - the connects must hold at base and must be veracious, for that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader.

She goes on to say that, like all of us, the nonfiction writer

> thinks about actual things. He can make sense of them analytically or artistically. In either case he renders the real world coherent and meaningful, even if only bits of it, and even if that coherence and meaning reside only inside small texts.(4)

We know that factual accuracy and veracity are trickier than they seem. Our memories are distorted by subjectivity, time and distance. As David James Duncan observes: 'The best that a would-be nonfiction writer can do is to use imperfect language to invoke imperfectly remembered events based on imperfect perceptions'.(5) And as Bob Root asserts

> Artistry needs some latitude; self-disclosure may be too risky to be total, particularly when it involves disclosure of others. Just as Thoreau compressed two years at Walden Pond into one to get the focus he needed for his great book, creative nonfiction writers sometimes have to alter the accuracy of events on order to achieve the accuracy of interpretation.

DLB. This is the ethical dividing line for me in creative nonfiction: acknowledging that memory is faulty, that research can never be complete and that facts are somewhat relative, is different than wilfully altering fact to make your story more compelling or more convenient.

MS. The great challenge of memoir writing is knowing how much we remember is reliable and accepting the likelihood that we are 'inventing the truth'. To quote Bob Root again on this:

> Memories blur over time and edit themselves into different forms that others who had the same experience might not recognise. Finding the language to describe experience sometimes alters it, and your description of the experience becomes the memory, the way a photograph does. We may also feel a need to omit the irrelevant detail or protect the privacy of others not as committed to self-disclosure as we are. The truth may not necessarily be veracious enough to take into court or into a laboratory; it needs only be veracious enough to satisfy the writer's purpose and the art of the writing.

DLB. What separates creative nonfiction, then, from fiction which is inspired by real events?

MS. Apart from sharing some of the same literary techniques (story, setting, dialogue, character and so forth) there is one big difference. In writing creative nonfiction you start with something that did actually happen, and with real people, which may include yourself, and you are limited and bound by those realities. Fiction writers and poets can range freely wherever imagination takes them, whereas creative nonfiction writers are bound by the truth of what happened, or what they recall happened.

DLB. I agree. Whereas fiction writers might jump off from a historical moment or person, fiction is not constrained by any sense of staying true to those facts. Much of this, as you have mentioned, is especially relevant to memoir writing, your area of speciality.

MS. Memoirists must own up to being unreliable narrators. The reality is that when we retell past events - even if it is simply to reminisce - we invariably embellish our stories. And whether we do this to make better sense of what happened, or if it's simply to make the story more interesting, we still wind up being non-objective, even invented, personas. And then there's the shifting nature of memory itself and the fact that language by its very nature distorts human experience.

For example, recently at a writer's conference, I gave a public reading of a memoir about a turbulent relationship I'd had with an old high-school coach. In the question-and-answer period I was asked a number of questions. Things like: Does the writer have to stick to the literal facts of the story? What should writers do when they cannot remember the details of an important incident, situation, or conversation? Can/should they embellish? And if so, to what end?

For myself, I believe that the type of memoir a writer produces is determined at least in part by that writer's sensibility, as well as by how that writer defines the genre. Someone who thinks that a memoir should be an accurate, literal rendering of the past will compose a different kind of work from a writer who sees memoir as a form of self-exploration. A writer who positions herself as a witness-interpreter will create a different reality than a writer who places herself at the centre of her own story.

Perhaps it's because I'm in my fifties that my current memoirs tend to be self-interrogative. The impulse behind the piece I wrote about my old baseball coach, for example, came from a mid-life urge to go back in time and examine our turbulent relationship. Moreover, the memory was triggered by a disturbing situation in my current life. In probing the childhood/adult connection, I found myself having to reshape and rearrange specific events, situations and conversations. And I'm convinced that I would not have stumbled upon that connection between my adolescent and adult self had I simply reconstructed the events of the relationship precisely as they had occurred. Consequently, I understand what Pam Houston means when she says, 'I'm not going to tell the story the way it happened. I'm going to tell it the way I remember it'.

DLB. You are suggesting that in memoir imagination transposes memory? What does this do to the 'truth' of what actually happened?

MS. First, there is what I have mentioned before, that which Philip Gerard calls the 'truth of event'. Then there is the 'emotional' and 'aesthetic truths' that Fern Kupfer refers to.(6) And in *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, Judith Barrington quotes Mary Clearman Blew as

saying that 'I struggled for a long time with the conflicting claims of the exact truth of the story and the emotional truth as I perceived it'.(7) In a similar vein, Vivian Gornick says that 'What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of imagination is required.'(8) Though no less equivocal, poet Stephen Dunn phrases it this way: 'Just because it happened to you is no reason to write about it. You have to be interesting or no-one will care.'(9)

DLB. But there is a difference between being conscious that you are making an individual interpretation of events, and wilfully altering those events to make a better story?

MS. We'll be debating this issue for as long as we talk about the genre's possibilities. The writer of creative nonfiction often serves as the audience's guide or surrogate, inviting the reader to share the writer's experience. Therefore, there's always an element of subjectivity - if not fictionality - that characterises this genre. But there's of course a line which one must draw between complete invention and observed reality.

DLB. This often becomes an ethical issue rather than a philosophical discussion of the relativity of 'truth'. There is a vast difference, for instance, in making it clear at the outset that you are a white writer imagining being black, than misleading readers into believing that you actually are a black writer and can thus make certain claims about the authenticity of what you are writing about.

MS. I agree. What you're describing is something fiction writers do all the time, but that nonfiction writers shouldn't even think of attempting - if for no other reason than it calls the writer's credibility into question. In instances where writers are consciously changing true events, they should include some kind of disclaimer that states their intentions. The disclaimer allows the reader to make up her/his own mind about how important the 'factual truth' is. Memoirists disclaim all the time and they often create composite characters, change people's names, invent or imagine details, alter the actual happenings so that the story has an intentional plot. And/or, they sometimes heighten characters, invent dialogue and explore the imaginations of other characters and so on.

DLB. All of which makes a good memoir?

MS. Well, only if those alterations create a truer story. And that depends on what the writer is searching to discover. Memoir is written in reflection, so the writer has to be self-interrogative, self-analytical. You're always searching to make some coherent sense out of the story or experience. The voice of the writer is also important, as is the presence of the writer in the narrative. Finally, a literary memoir also needs to go beyond the telling of the story. Ideally, we're hoping our personal story reaches for some larger purpose or idea.

DLB. How did you intially become interesting in creative nonfiction?

MS. The form seems to suit my sensibility best. I wrote poems, plays, and stories, but none of those genres seemed as suitable as essays and memoirs did. I became a memoirist because I wanted to understand some of the events, influences, and decisions that had led me to become a mid-life writer. In sixth grade, for example, my teacher selected me to write a sports column for the mimeographed class newsletter, and I wrote about Jackie Robinson's drive to break the colour bar and become the first Black American in the major leagues. The column was praised by classmates and teachers, and that praise had an impact on me. My

writing had attracted the kind of attention that an awkward, chubby, eleven-year-old wouldn't ordinarily achieve. That's where the writing addiction began.

DLB. To talk now about teaching - is the tertiary teaching of creative writing in the USA still a growth area, and do you think this growth will continue? How are creative nonfiction programs faring, and the MFA specifically?

MS. Creative writing courses, and especially MFA programs, have continued to grow throughout the last decade. In the past, creative writing and composition programs were at the lowest level of an English department's hierarchy, but now they constitute the highest enrolment numbers. Consequently, they have become more respected and prominent. I do not believe this growth has reached its peak yet. There are more and more undergraduate courses in creative nonfiction, and the MFA programs in creative writing are thriving. Many students, especially older students returning to school, are getting MFAs in creative writing knowing full well that these degrees will probably not lead to teaching jobs.

DLB. Why are they taking these largely non-vocational studies?

MS. I think that MFA students, especially older students, return to school because they want to pursue a different life than the one they have been living since they left college. Many have been married (and/or divorced), raised families and/or pursued careers. And now they want to write - something they may have always wanted to do but either didn't have the time or circumstances that would allow them to do so. Some return to school because they are simply tired of the predictable day-to-day routine and/or the responsibilities they have had to carry for the last twenty to twenty-five years. Since the MFA is self-enrichment for them, they come with full knowledge that the degree will probably not lead to gainful employment. They're in these programs because it gives them the opportunity to work on their writing under the guidance of practicing writers.

The most valuable thing about the MFA, especially the low residency MFA, is that the writing workshops are taught by working writers. Consequently, much of the emphasis is on acquiring craft. Which is what these students seek, and need.

DLB. Are older students attracted to undergraduate programs as well?

MS. I taught in a small university town, so I didn't have many adults in my undergraduate classes. A few when I taught at night. I think urban universities enrol larger numbers of adult undergraduates.

DLB. What do you think is the optimum number of students for a creative writing class/workshop?

MS. No less than 10 or 12, no more than 15. I usually had classes of 25 to 28 students.

DLB. I believe you introduced creative nonfiction to MSU first in a freshman composition unit?

MS. When I began to teach composition in the early 1970s, even colleagues who started their course with a personal essay were suspicious of the form. The prevailing idea was

something like 'Let them get all that confessional stuff out of their systems early on, then they can move onto more important writing'. Obviously, I think that's the wrong approach. Novice writers need permission to discover what's meaningful to them before they're able to make connections to larger issues or ideas. Too often the composition class is used as a way to teach students how to write a lab report or a critical essay on a required novel. Yet when I taught the personal essay, my students' work seemed more vital and energetic than the academic writing they produced. In terms of craft, it wasn't better work, but the writing was honest and deeply felt. And the students knew it.

As a personal essayist, I'm convinced this form is as intellectually challenging as any other academic or literary genre. As a writing teacher, I believe my colleagues' prescriptions - like the standard inductive or deductive argument, the literary/critical essay, the compare-and-contrast theme - encourage only linear and logical thinking and discourage all but the most cursory thought and reflection.

DLB. My students were at first suspicious or afraid of the personal voice, especially of using the first person, in university-level writing, but once they start to investigate the form, they really embrace the personal essay, memoir, dramatised historical narrative and other forms of creative nonfiction.

MS. That's all true. But as I said, it's as difficult to write a good personal essay as it is to write a good academic paper. I worked my students as hard on their personal writing as I did on critical writing. And they were always being asked to make connections between their personal experience and larger, more universal issues.

DLB. Can you characterise your students? How did these change over those twenty-five years?

MS. I think that students have changed as the culture has shifted. So many students who are now in college did not grow up reading literary books and knowing much about writers. Consequently, it's more of a challenge to teach them the things I care about. The way I've managed to do it is to be as passionate as I could about books and equally engaged in my writing. And by urging my students to write about subjects they're passionate about.

DLB. Who were the best creative nonfiction writers?

MS. By and large, the music majors. They have the imagination and discipline that it takes to write literary nonfiction, or indeed, literary work of any kind. Many have been composing and playing music from an early age.

DLB. Many of my creative nonfiction students find that when they discover research, they can't decide what to write about. Is this your experience?

MS. Always a big problem. The way I attempted to solve it was by having them write multi-genre research papers on subjects and topics they were curious about, but had never taken the time to research.

DLB. How do you assess your courses?

MS. I never gave letter or number grades in my creative writing classes until the end of the semester, when I had to come up with a final grade. Instead, I worked with a modified contract grading system. If a student gave an honest effort and wasn't a particularly accomplished writer, I'd give him/her something in the B range. The better writers got higher grades, but only if they did all the work and contributed in class. The ones who didn't do the work usually were gone by mid-term.

DLB. What do you say to the assertion that creativity can't be assessed? That creative writing/creativity/writing can't be taught?

MS. It's impossible to measure talent and growth - much less creativity. You can't predict what a student can accomplish if that student is motivated to succeed. The best a teacher can do is to create a climate that encourages and rewards risk taking and curiosity. A good writing class allows students to discover and use their creativity, then it's up to them to decide how far to take it. The majority probably won't become writers. But some will use the classes for self-enrichment, and a few will get hooked on good literature.

DLB. We are finding here at QUT that our students (and particularly the undergraduates) although they want to be writers, are not readers.

MS. This has been my experience as well. I think it means that many students are forming their views of writing and the writing life from the media's emphasis on 'celebrity' writers such as the Oprah winners or Stephen King or John Grisham. That's not a bad thing if it gets them to read. But too many beginning writing students see writing as an easy way of making a lot of money. One reason why they don't read good literature is that it's too often taught as an academic subject instead of a creative art. Also, the study of literature is no longer as important or respected as it once was. As universities compete more and more for large numbers of students, Cultural Studies and Popular Culture courses have replaced Literature courses.

DLB. What do you think this emphasis (on Cultural Studies and Popular Culture rather than Literature) has meant for students' writing?

MS. Because Cultural Studies and Popular Culture are usually taught as academic subjects, students are encouraged to write in the language of the particular discipline they're studying. Moreover, many of the texts they read are written by academics. Consequently, the students' writing is frequently polemical, abstract and coded. This may not be true of all students or all programs, but it was certainly my experience when I was teaching graduate classes.

DLB. How can we encourage students to read?

MS. It's difficult to encourage large numbers of students to read (literature) when they live in a consumer culture that discourages imagination, reflection, and self-discovery. In the last few decades, the majority of large, state-supported American universities have marginalised most liberal arts curricula in favour of a top-down, corporate model of higher education.

That said, an engaged, enthusiastic teacher can have some influence on his/her students. In my own classroom, I favour an approach that encourages students to respond in personal and expressive forms to the literary texts they're reading. By this I mean dialogue journals, personal essays, personal/critical essays, multi-genre research papers, feature articles, letters

to authors, invented prequels, sequels and so forth. Even the so-called non-readers can relate to these kinds of activities.

DLB. I'm interested in how you balanced your own writing practice with the demands of teaching?

MS. It wasn't easy. This dilemma troubled me when I first became an English teacher. Many of us choose this profession because we love writing and teaching, but time and circumstance force us to choose one over the other. For my first fifteen years, I put more of my energies into teaching and learning how to teach. But I believe that teachers of writing should be writers as well. They should know what writing is like from the inside-out. As a result, I wrote along with my students, sharing my writing with them, and I also directed a national writer's conference for English teachers for seven summers.

When I was writing regularly, at first, the writing energised my teaching. But you're also drawing from the same well, and before long the student papers piled up and I fell behind in preparation. Then I found myself rushing from my writing studio to classes, workshops, and committee meetings. By mid-term I was usually worn-out and frazzled. About ten years ago I began a writing regimen that I hoped would allow me to spend as much time on my writing as on my teaching. I wrote in the mornings and taught in late afternoons and evenings. Over time though, the writing took over and I finally had to choose. Since I'd taught for so long, I thought it was time to devote my full energies to writing. In the mid-'90s, I put in for early retirement; and when the journal came along three years ago, I was able to stop teaching. The kind of teaching I do now is at writer's conferences, and through the give-and-take I have with writers whose work we accept for publication.

DLB. And your book with Robert Root, *The Fourth Genre*, which we have already mentioned, has proved to be an important textbook for teaching creative nonfiction?

MS. Depending on how you view the genre, the anthology can be very useful. Unlike the traditonal anthologies, this book features contemporary writers of creative nonfiction. Our book's approach is literary and writerly, focusing on the form and acknowledging the literary impulse in nonfiction. Our most vital concern is to initiate a writer-to-reader conversation on and about creative nonfiction. We designed the book to encourage students to learn their craft the way most successful writers have learned theirs: by reading what other writers have written, by picking up tips and ideas from writers about the way they write, and by applying specific strategies culled from the readings to their own writing.

We settled on a three part structure, beginning with a compilation of contemporary essays, memoirs, literary journalism, and personal cultural criticism. The second part presents essays that discuss the form, as well as specific issues surrounding the genre. Some of those pieces are written by the same writers whose work we featured in Part 1. The third part pairs essays and memoirs with text by their authors who are commenting on their processes. We included contributions by Scott Russell Sanders, Patricia Hampl, Phillip Lopate, Richard Selzer, Anne Dillard, Mary Clearman Blew, Tracy Kidder, John McPhee, Donald Murray and other noted writers. But we also have at least as many works by younger, emerging writers.

DLB. What was your envisaged market?

MS. Writers, interested readers, students, and teachers.

DLB. Last year (April 2000) your anthology *Peninsula: Essays and Memoirs from Michigan* was published by MSU Press. I especially liked the regionality of this collection: the thirty-seven contemporary personal essays and memoirs mesh together as a multi-voiced, multifaceted evocation of local place. Although these essays are tied together by the writers' association with Michigan, each piece stands apart as an individual, personal recollection.

MS. That was a wonderful book to work on. I'm a New Yorker who moved to Michigan, and putting the book together helped me to understand the distinctiveness of this place. There are pieces that look out on nature and the outdoors, as well as essays about living in more metropolitan areas. There are also expatriate pieces, and essays that mine memory and imagination. In this anthology I wanted to relay a sense of the variety and flavour of Michigan's character as well as spotlighting the varying styles and individual histories of each contributing writer.

DLB. What are you working on now?

MS. Besides working on my baseball memoir, Bob Root and I are finishing the second edition revisions of *The Fourth Genre* [book]. I'm also finalising the Editor's Notes for the next issue (the fourth one) of the journal.

DLB. As an editor, you must have been pleased with the Pushcart Prize nomination that *Fourth Genre* [journal] recently received.

MS. We were thrilled. We're a relatively new journal, and getting a Pushcart Prize so soon was real achievement. But the award is as much or more for the writer - in this case, Bret Lott - as it is for the journal that published the work. Bret's piece, by the way, is among other things, about his response to having been chosen as an Oprah Book Club winner. For those who aren't familiar with this award, the Pushcart is an annual anthology of the best literary work (poems, stories, essays and memoirs) chosen from the small literary presses and literary magazines. The works are juried by previous winners. Having a piece selected for this anthology is perhaps the highest honour a literary magazine can receive. The other important annuals are The Best American series; the Best American Essays, Best American Poetry, Best American Fiction, Best American Nature Writing, Best American Sports Writing, Best American Spiritual Writing and so forth. As you can see, these are genre specific, while the Pushcart Prize includes all genres.

DLB. The journal is almost unique in its concentration on creative nonfiction. Aside from it, I have only found Lee Gutkind's *Creative Nonfiction* and another titled *River Teeth* from Ashland University with a similar concentration.

MS. There's one other in the US, *Under the Sun*, which comes out once a year. But all four have varying points of view about the genre. *Fourth Genre* is devoted solely to works of contemporary nonfiction, from the personal essay - including nature, environmental, and travel writing - to memoir, literary journalism, and personal cultural criticism. We also feature interviews with practicing writers, round table discussions on genre issues, and book reviews.

What distinguishes us from the others is that we emphasise the personal, autobiographical and literary impulses (discovery, exploration and reflection) rather than focusing on more journalistic approaches. In selecting particular works for the journal we try and maintain a balance between writing that is serious, informal, rigorous and pleasurable. The pieces we tend to favour are often written from the same impulse that might prompt a lyric poem or a

first person short story. Many poems, stories, and essay/memoirs begin as a nagging itch or a persistent thought or feeling that won't go away. Consequently, the writer feels compelled to find out why that urge is so insistent. Essayists and memoirists often set out to explore their subjects and ideas without really knowing where they'll wind up, or what they'll discover. In the process of writing, the writer hopes to discover/learn something he did not know when he began the piece. That's part of the challenge and satisfaction of writing creative nonfiction.

Appendix

Conversation created from email correspondence and conversations with Michael Steinberg from October 2000 to March 2001; his editorials in *Fourth Genre* (1998-2000) http://www.msupress.msu.edu/fourthgenre/index.html and the following:

Books:

Michael Steinberg (ed.). *Peninsula: Essays and Memoirs from Michigan*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000.

Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg. *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg. *Those Who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English (NCET), 1996.

Clinton S. Burhans Jr. and Michael Steinberg. *The Writers' Way: A Process Approach to Writing*. USA: Spring Publishing, 1984 [first pub. 1980].

Selected Creative Nonfiction Essays and Memoirs:

Michael Steinberg. 'Trading Off: A Memoir'. *The Missouri Review* May 1994. [Winner of the Missouri Review Editor's Prize. Cited in Robert Atwan (series ed). *Best American Essays 1995*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Reprinted in Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg. *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.]

Michael Steinberg. 'Long Courtship'. *Sport Literate* Winter 1996/97. [Nominated for a 1997 Pushcart Prize.]

Michael Steinberg. 'Chin Music'. *The Florida Review* Fall 1997/Winter 1998. Reprinted in *The MacGuffin* 17,1 (Spring 2000). [Cited in Robert Atwan (series ed). *Best American Essays, 1998*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.]

Michael Steinberg. 'Dream Expatriate: A Meditation on Memory and Place'. In Michael Steinberg (ed). *Peninsula: Essays and Memoirs from Michigan*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000.

Michael Steinberg. 'A Voice in the Choir: Musings of a Mid-Life Writer'. *The MacGuffin* 17,1 (Spring 2000). [Nominated for a 2000 Pushcart Prize.]

Michael Steinberg. 'Writing Literary Memoir: Are We Obliged to Tell the Real Truth?' *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 1,1 (Spring 1998).

Selected Essays on Writing and Teaching Writing:

Michael Steinberg. 'Why Write Narrative?' (with 'Moving On', a personal essay/memoir). In Ruth Nathan (ed). *Writers in the Classroom*. Norwood: Christopher Gordon Publishers, 1991.

Michael Steinberg. 'Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching: Serving Two Passions'. In Maureen Barbieri and Linda Rief (eds). *Workshop Six: The Teacher as Writer*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994.

Michael Steinberg. 'The Writing's For Us: Granting Ourselves Permission Through Personal Narratives'. In Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg (eds). *Those who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 1996.

Michael Steinberg. 'Creating Our Own: Writing About Literature in Expressive and Imaginative Forms'. In Robert L. Root Jr. and Michael Steinberg (eds). *Those who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 1996.

Michael Steinberg. 'Self Discovery to Self Examination: Teaching the Personal Essay as Inquiry'. In David Starkey (ed). *Teaching Writing Creatively*. Portsmouth: Boynton Cook/Heinemann, 1998.

Interviews:

Adele P. Letterman. 'Michael Steinberg: An Interview'. *The MacGuffin* 17,1 (Spring 2000).

'On Nonpoetry'. Nonfiction Symposium. *The Bellingham Review* 22,1 (Spring 1999).

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Notes

1. Frank McCourt. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir.* New York: Viking, first published 1996; and Mary Carr. *The Liar's Club: A Memoir.* New York: Viking Penguin, 1995. *The Liar's Club* is discussed in Steinberg and Root's 'Introduction' in *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998. return to article
2. Patricia Hampl. Unpublished talk. Attended by Michael Steinberg. return to article
3. Rebecca McClanahan. *Write Your Heart Out*. To be published September 2001 by Walking Stick Press, Cincinnati. return to artilce
4. Annie Dillard. 'Introduction'. *The Best American Essays 1988*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1998. return to article
5. David James Duncan. 'Nonfiction = Fiction'. *Orion* 15,3 (Summer 1996): 57. return to article
6. Fern Kupfer. 'Everything but the truth'. Talk given at the Associated Writing Programs Convention. Washington, DC, 14 April 1996. return to article
7. Judith Barrington. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*. Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1996. return to article
8. Vivian Gornick. 'Why Memoir Now?' *Women's Review of Books* 8,10 (July 1996): 22. return to article
9. Stephen Dunn. Lecture. Stonecoast Writer's Conference. Freeport, Maine, 27 July 1996. return to article

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au