

## The Mouse

[This issue of The Mouse is a refereed article]

Queensland University of Technology

*Donna Lee Brien*

### *Creative Nonfiction: A virtual conversation with Lee Gutkind*

When in 1999 I began working on writing an undergraduate unit on creative nonfiction writing one name came up across all my Internet searches - Lee Gutkind. Before I started researching, I knew creative nonfiction was taught widely in writing schools across the USA, with its popularity and profile having developed rapidly over the last decade. So much so that (as Nigel Krauth can testify from personal experience) creative nonfiction was the 'buzz' area of the 1999 American Associated Writing Programs Conference held in Albany, New York, a conference which was attended by 1400 delegates. What I did not know was who stood at the centre of this whirlwind.

Lee Gutkind, the former Director of the writing program of the university of Pittsburgh, is currently Professor of English at that university, Director of the Creative Nonfiction Foundation, and founding editor of the pioneering journal, *Creative Nonfiction*. (<http://www.cnf.edu/>) Author of eight creative nonfiction books including *Many Sleepless Nights: The World of Organ Transplantation* (1990) and *Stuck in Time: The Tragedy of Childhood Mental Illness* (1993), Gutkind is editor of *The Creative Nonfiction Reader* (Tarcher/Putnam), the *Emerging Writers in Creative Nonfiction* book series (Duquesne University Press) and Director of the Mid-Atlantic Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference at Goucher College in Baltimore. His *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (1997) has become a leading title in the (John) Wiley writing series in the USA.

In order to introduce Professor Gutkind as the Keynote Speaker in the Creative Nonfiction strand of the Writing 2000 Conference, I have constructed this (creative nonfiction) virtual interview from our email conversation and by utilising excerpts from the author's published works.

*The questions which I am sure you are always asked are: How do you define Creative Nonfiction? How does this differ from traditional nonfiction writing, from journalism and especially from the feature article?*

Ever since I began to write and to teach writing 20 years ago, people have been asking me to define creative nonfiction. And I always refuse because, for one thing, it is an unfair and usually provocative question. Are poets and novelists asked to define poetry and fiction? Then why must I define creative nonfiction?

I will say how creative nonfiction differs from fiction and traditional journalism, however. Fiction, from a literal standpoint, is not true - or at least not totally true (not so as the writer is willing to admit) while creative nonfiction, if not completely true, is as true as the writer can make it. I am not unaware of the foggy gray line being drawn here, but one can't be easily literal about art and literature. The creative nonfiction writer tries to be as truthful and factual as possible. Making things up to enhance the narrative is unacceptable. But creative nonfiction is very similar to fiction in technique.

The creative nonfiction writer is permitted (encouraged, in fact) to take advantage of all of the literary techniques available to fiction writers and poets. By this I mean writing in scenes, using description, dialogue, specificity of detail, characterisation and point of view. By 'point of view' I mean that the reader can be made to see the world through the eyes of the writer, the subject about whom the writer is writing - or through the invisible third person objective eye.

Creative nonfiction is very story-oriented; it is narrative. That's the 'style' part - the creative part. But then, what about the nonfiction part? We'll call that 'substance', the informational part - the teaching and learning part. Most of the best creative nonfiction has information embedded within story. Look at McPhee, Ackerman, Dillard (and Mailer, Hemingway, Wolfe, Talese, Ross, etc.). The stories these writers tell are compelling, but within the story is information that enlightens a reader. Even in the most compelling memoir (look at *Angela's Ashes*) there is a learning element. McCourt not only tells a moving story, but the reader learns first hand about poverty in a unique but universal way.

That's a good phrase for the creative nonfiction writer to remember: Unique (on a personal level) and universal so that all readers can understand and relate. That's how we make meaning - and meaning is what literature is all about. What we write must mean something to our readers. Otherwise, if we aren't saying anything, what's the point of writing?

I want to say one more thing about creative nonfiction. You have to understand that it is not a genre like fiction and poetry. It is a literary, cultural and political movement. The creative nonfiction writer is poised to present reality in such a way that it cannot be avoided. It is provocative and it has teeth because it is true, and because it is true it can change lives and shape opinion in ways that fiction has hardly ever been able to do. I believe that this is one reason that a number of academics and critics have attempted to discredit it: because it has the potential to be such a dominant, mind-breaking force.

*Do you know when the term was first used?*

'Creative nonfiction' was first popularly used as an umbrella to describe this kind of work in the application form for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Creative Writing Fellowships. It was a title which seemed to have been employed defensively to distinguish between traditional journalism and the personal essay. (For a while, the NEA foolishly replaced creative nonfiction with something called 'belles lettres'.) Ironically, under the NEA's guidelines (five essays published over the previous five years in respected journals), writing by Talese, Wolfe, McPhee, *et al* would probably not have qualified in any category.

It is surprising to learn how many writers (and readers) don't understand, exactly, the elements of the form in which they are writing. Some are attracted by the word 'creative' and think that because their prose is unusual or distinctive and because the stories they are telling are true that they are writing in the genre of creative nonfiction. Others, usually people with a journalistic background, are put off by the word 'creative,' maintaining that if it is creative, then it certainly can't be accurate, believable or ethical - the essences and anchors of nonfiction prose.

However, there is no conflict between being a good 'reporter' and a good writer, creative in technique and approach. The essays published in each issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, the journal I edit, are, I believe, models of the truest forms of creative nonfiction, in that they simultaneously 'showcase' or 'frame' fact in a creative context. The 'truth' (which should not be confused with the factual or informational aspects of the genre) is another important element of the 'classic' creative nonfiction form - and often a more personal one. A writer's concept of the truth may not be universally accepted and may even conflict with the facts as others understand or remember them. Good creative nonfiction does not deny personal opinion; on the contrary, it welcomes the subjective voice.

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

Most creative nonfiction is written in the first person. The challenge in writing nonfiction in this way is to be intimate and revealing while reaching beyond the boundaries of self and embracing a universal audience or message.

*You've mentioned truth, but you have also written about nonfiction creative writers having a permission to lie.*

For a memoir about her family, a novelist and former journalist whom I know manipulated the transition from fiction to nonfiction in such a way. When she began her book, she felt blocked by the perceived conflict between the two, unable to comfortably employ the novelistic techniques of scene, dialog and description. And so, in order to get started, she granted herself permission to lie.

The author did not intend to make up facts or tell stories that weren't true, a violation of the promise inherent in all nonfiction. But the narrow range of creative options traditionally granted to a journalist inhibited her. Giving herself 'permission to lie' allowed three-dimensional thought and scenic expression in a novelistic context. She did not permit her writing momentum to be interrupted by the literal truth.

After her first draft was completed and the revision and rewriting process was launched, she removed or repaired the 'lies' she had inserted. At that point, the book was as true and honest as she could make it. She then submitted complete drafts to the people most involved in her story over the years. They returned the manuscripts without any significant changes or suggestions. Giving herself permission to lie led to as true a document as possible - from all characters' points-of-view.

It is important to point out that this author was working from memory; during the year of crisis about which she had been writing she had been unable to keep a journal with regularity or take all the necessary notes. It's not certain that the people who 'fact-checked' her manuscript actually said exactly what she remembered that they said and whether the conversations, scenes and surroundings were exactly as she had recreated them. But according to the characters involved in the experience, her version or 'reconstruction' was as correct an approximation as possible.

*Would you always advocate giving work for subjects to check? Couldn't this also be fraught with problems?*

Sending a draft of an essay or article to people about whom you have written and asking them to review it for factual discrepancies is touchy. A

writer never really knows what aspects of conversations, ideas or incidents will touch a nerve. I am often amazed at what people actually complain about. I was once telephoned by a heart transplant surgeon about whom I had written. I was wary when he identified himself on the telephone and I heard the serious tone of his voice.

I had previously passed along to him sections of my book in which he appeared. As it turned out, of the many scenes I had recreated - dozens of pages - he objected to only one expletive, which he used quite frequently. He asked if I would delete that word (or substitute it with a more benign alternative) because his mother would read the book, and he did not want her to know that he swore. I complied.

The fact that my observations of the heart transplant world resonated with the surgeon doesn't mean that we concurred about every single detail along the way. We saw the plight of his patients and the motivations behind his actions somewhat differently. This difference in perception is expected in literature, however; the absolute essence of truth is always debatable. Imagine putting a video camera on the shoulders of each participant of a dispute, game or debate. Even though experience and location are shared, each interpretation will be skewed.

*Much of this is especially relevant to writing memoir.*

Precisely. This divergence of opinion and perception is what makes memoir so special. We all view the past through translucent layers of resentment, anger, love, misunderstanding, stubbornness, respect - and a multitude of other emotions and beliefs. Writing a memoir is the most personal and frightening of all forms of literature because it reveals layers of memory and reflection so biting and painful that the writing of it can radically change the entire reality - past, present and future - of a writer's life.

*On the writer's life you often mention the authors you admire and whose work has influenced you - Tom Wolfe, Jack Kerouac, Annie Dillard, Ernest Hemingway.*

Most of my contemporaries have been inspired by books and writers when they were young. This makes sense. Obviously, if you want to be a writer then, first, you will have no doubt been a reader. Even Beethoven, who achieved his best work after he became deaf, was inspired to compose and conduct music by the real thing. The books which have had a strong influence on me and my writing are all of Hemingway's, but most especially his short stories. Gay Talese and John McPhee were also inspirational, especially *The Bridge* and *Fame and Obscurity* by Talese and *The Pine Barrens* and *Coming into the Country* by McPhee. I would also have to mention Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*, as well as Susan Sheehan and Marc Singer. *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley is brilliant, as is *Brothers and Keepers* by John Wideman and everything by James Baldwin. Poetry by Robert Frost and William Merredith was very influential in my twenties.

*Are your students similarly inspired?*

Lately I have been astounded to learn that many undergraduate writing majors have not been inspired in this way and, in fact, are not seemingly inspired at all. I don't know exactly when this happened because when I started teaching in the early 1970s, Talese, Wolfe, Jack Kerouac, Lillian Ross, Hemingway and Joseph Mitchell were student heroes, a mainstay

of my students' regular dialogue in class and out. But lately I have been asking my students to name the last good nonfiction book they read or which authors influenced them to choose nonfiction as a career. Not more than perhaps one in ten of my students (we are talking about sophomores, juniors and sometimes seniors) can usually answer by naming anyone else but Jon Krakauer. Sometimes I name the leading writers in our field. I will say, 'Who are these people? Diane Ackerman, Annie Dillard, John McPhee, Tracy Kidder?' The names will be vaguely familiar, but most students won't know.

*Why, then, are they studying writing?*

It is not often that a student can provide a reason, I am dismayed to say. Writing seems like an interesting major - a springboard to law school, marketing, sales, etc. I guess it is.

*At QUT we are also experiencing a general lack of interest in literature among many of our students. Is this malaise USA-wide?*

This ambivalence toward literature is certainly not limited to undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh where I do most of my teaching. Wherever I travel, giving workshops and readings across the US, and abroad, I am always amazed to discover how unfamiliar creative writing students are with creative writers.

*Do you think this could be a result of the 'MTV generation' syndrome?*

Yes, and poor high school preparation. And parents who don't understand that literature remains the most powerful artistic and political force in the world - not sports and not even popular music.

*Can you further characterise your students? Who are the best (creative nonfiction) writers?*

While it is true that I have taught in creative writing programs for the last two decades, my best students are almost always students who are not writing majors exclusively - men and women with a knowledge of, and a passion for, science, architecture or music (for example) in addition to writing always excel. These are people with something to say, which is at the cusp of the best creative nonfiction. All the writers I have named above as preeminent leaders in the field have chosen to emphasise the substance of their work over the style of their presentation.

*Does that last statement mean you think the content of creative nonfiction is its most important element, that the substance of creative nonfiction is more central than the style in which it is written?*

Substance can mean fact, it can mean feeling, and it can mean the universal appeal of the human spirit. This is not to say that style shouldn't be important to writers, but not at the expense of the message and the meaning. Writing programs tend to minimise the intellectual value of the essay or article, while maximising the presentation.

*You speak, of course, from personal experience. How did you become a (creative nonfiction) writer?*

Before I decided to be a writer, I thought a lot about what I wanted to accomplish in my life. I admit that I didn't know exactly what that was, but I knew two things. First, I wanted to be understood. That is, I wanted people to be interested in my ideas and feelings generally - and what I

knew, specifically. Secondly, I wanted my ideas and experiences to make an impact on other people - to change or influence a small part of the world, in one way or another. In order to achieve those goals, I had to more thoroughly understand myself. And I had to learn a great deal about how other people lived. Of course, I had a passion for writing, and I had been significantly affected by the writers I had been reading. I thought that I would give myself a year to see whether this was the lifestyle and the profession that would help me achieve those objectives.

At the time I was a motorcyclist, and I was travelling extensively around the country on my two-wheeled machine. This was the subject of my first book. Since then, I have travelled through a half-dozen different worlds in order to write books - baseball umpires, organ transplantation, veterinary hospitals, psychiatric institutions - with the same ideas and intentions in mind. I'm not exactly certain if I have successfully achieved even an iota of the goals I have described, but I covet the memories and experiences of the journeys I have made.

*How do you manage your own nonfiction research notes - do you work from notebooks, index cards, computer files? What do you do with these when you finish a project?*

When I am involved in an immersion situation, which is very often, I jot notes from my observations into my notebook. I don't take down everything - just key words. Enough to jog my memory. Then, when my day is done (or when I want to take a break), I find a private place, I take out my micro tape recorder and use the notes in my notebook to verbally reconstruct my day, my readings, observations - all the experiences I felt that were noteworthy, etc. In essence, I tell myself stories when I am recreating in the tape recorder - I strain to remember everything possible about the experiences I have just recently observed. I tell all. Then I type the transcripts into the computer, shaping and eliminating and adding, as needed, with the help of my memory. The idea is to record EVERYTHING you remember - collect a gigantic block of information - then cut back and shape later. This may sound like a lot of work on the front side of the experience, but it pays off in the end. Much of what I end up with becomes the anchor and foundation of my first draft. Remember also that the idea is to tell that tape recorder stories, to embed information into story form and embed information between stories. That's the classic Creative Nonfiction approach.

*What are you working on now?*

I just finished a memoir called 'Dr. Mason's Revelation'. I will read from it in Australia. It chronicles a part of my life that takes me from my youth, through my motorcycle experiences as a hippy/nomad and into my new life as a father and 'respectable' writer and teacher. In this book I am attempting to make life fun and meaningful at the same time.

*You have been enormously influential in the development of teaching creative nonfiction in the USA. Can you describe the current state of the university teaching of creative writing in the USA? Is it still a growth area, and will this growth continue?*

Creative writing programs have increased at such a phenomenal rate in this country, an increase which, given the general lack of interest in reading, I find it difficult to understand. I assume creative writing programs are profitable, which is what must drive the proliferation, but there's surely a limit to the amount of potential income being generated considering that most workshops are limited to 15-20 students. Some of

my colleagues in history or philosophy (with the help of a couple of grad assistants) lecture to 400 plus students in a gigantic auditorium.

*And creative nonfiction programs specifically?*

The main problem with teaching creative nonfiction is that there aren't enough teachers with strong credentials in the area. Because creative nonfiction continues to be a growth area, people are finding a way into the field through different avenues - composition and poetry, primarily. While the field has been significantly strengthened by writers who choose to cross genres, such as John Updike, Diane Ackerman, W.S. Merwin and John Irving (to name only a very few) it doesn't do us any good to have teachers and colleagues who come to us by default. This is changing, for sure, as more and more young people become increasingly turned on by 'The Movement'.

And make no mistake about it, creative nonfiction is not just a genre - it is a movement. This is key to understanding what is happening in this country - why it is exploding so rapidly. I am not going to Australia to talk about poetry or fiction, I am going to help 'introduce' Creative Nonfiction. This is an artistic and cultural event combined.

*How do you balance your own writing practice with the demands of teaching?*

I have always written on a regular schedule. Up at 4.30am seven days a week, and writing for as many hours as possible before even thinking about my teaching. Three years ago I became a single father with a nine-year-old son, so now, although I start at 4.30, I stop at 6.30 and resume work after breakfast and taking him to school at about 8.30. I am an incredibly happy father and I wouldn't trade my life for anything or anybody, but I simply can't be as productive as I once was at the moment - or at least professionally productive. I will now write for about 4-5 hours a day, then work on *Creative Nonfiction* for 3-4 hours or prepare for teaching, then work out at the local gym or take a run, then get Sam and help him with his homework. I teach evening classes. I put Sam to bed afterwards, then work for about an hour more, cleaning up the day's loose ends. I admit I am not so rigid with my evening hours. Sometimes I go out and have fun.

All successful writers will write on a regular schedule and in a disciplined way. But creative nonfiction requires an even more focused discipline because we are not only writers but also reporters and researchers who utilise literary techniques to capture and portray real life and to investigate significant moral and cultural issues.

*Would you say you are interested in both writing and teaching to the same degree?*

As a teacher, I am very committed to my students and make myself available to them whenever they need me - literally. But the politics of the Academy bore me. There's an awful lot of time-wasting going on.

*I take it that most of your students are external?*

Yes, most of the students are external, most have other lives (thank goodness) and many are more mature (30 and up). Creative nonfiction is very experiential - difficult for young people with limited life experience and limited confidence to confront important issues. Yet, I love teaching the introductory course to the four-course creative nonfiction sequence, revelling in the opportunity to teach technique and to turn them on to the

creative nonfiction form and movement - getting them to learn how to think about what they are writing and what it means.

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

To me 10-12 is perfect.

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

My students don't often say anything like that; rather, they say, 'Why do I have to research? I am a writer not a researcher'. I am exaggerating, but research and reading are not their favourite things to do, and many students cannot understand the layers of research, reading and experience/immersion a writer must wade-through/endure before finding a good topic. I spend an inordinate amount of time talking to my students about topic development and the narrowing of topic focus. I try to tell my students that writing isn't a mechanical act - the creative part of creative nonfiction, in many respects, is the thinking part. This is the best advice I can give anyone who intends to teach creative nonfiction: teach your students to think about story development and about meaning.

*Do you have a graded or Pass/Fail assessment system in your courses? What are the positives/drawbacks of this?*

Graded. There's nothing positive about this. In our country, we suffer from grade inflation. I always warn my undergrads that 'I give C's!' This always scares them. No one wants to admit to being average. Grad students 'freak out' when they get B's.

*How do you assess creative nonfiction writing in your courses? From your books I'd think it was according to how they have achieved your 5 R's - the real life (immersion) aspect of the writing experience, reflection, research, reading and 'riting.*

Yes, precisely, and how clearly they think about the meaning of whatever it is they are writing about.

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

I agree that creativity can't be taught, and I am not even certain of the exact definition of 'creativity' which means, obviously, different things to different people. But how to write in a lively, engaging and thoughtful manner and how to make your work intellectually significant for your reader can be taught. Many people do it every day.

*Does new technology have a place in your teaching?*

I communicate with my students on a day-to-day basis almost exclusively through e-mail or the Net. I also have long and very satisfying relationships with colleagues and other writers through e-mail. I communicate with my editors electronically. I meet readers everywhere - at workshops I give, readings at colleges, universities, libraries, but as I provide my e-mail address in some of my books, readers often will respond with questions and/or suggestions.

*The Creative Nonfiction journal has been groundbreaking in the field, as has your other promotion of the genre through other publishing ventures.*



We started publishing the journal seven years ago and, at the moment, we publish tri-quarterly - with one double issue annually. Currently, we are working on an alliance with a major publisher to produce and distribute each issue as a book. We already have developed a book series with Duquesne University Press for 'Emerging Writers in Creative Nonfiction,' (and I would love to see the work of Australian writers). I would like to do more theme issues, covering issues such as diversity, the economy, high-tech medicine, etc. I want to increase circulation to 25,000 in the next 3 years, and I very much want to begin publishing editions devoted to other countries. To this end I am looking for institutions to affiliate with in this country and overseas.

*And there is the annual nonfiction conference as well.*

We co-sponsor a writers' conference in which the best writers of nonfiction (John McPhee, Gay Talese, Diane Ackerman, etc.) come to teach and engage with students who enrol from across the country. I would like to do such a conference in other countries, on a regular basis. Australia is a possible first stop. I will be looking for sponsors while I am there.

*Have you ever been to Australia before?*

I visited Australia in 1987 for the International Transplant Congress in Sydney while I was working on *Many Sleepless Nights: The World on Organ Transplantation*. I had a wonderful time in Sydney visiting old friends and seeing the sights. Then I went to the Gold Coast for a holiday, which was terrific.

I have a long lost relative - my grandfather's youngest brother, a man who was supposed to have perished in the concentration camps during WWII. But there were vague rumours that he escaped from Poland/Germany and found his way to Australia. When my father retired, he went to the business library here and started searching telephone directories. He did not find Gutkind, but he did find a Goodchild family in Melbourne and he wrote to them. It turns out that he is the long lost brother. We had a reunion in Pittsburgh a few years ago, and I had intended to go to Melbourne to visit this June, but it turns out he has a winter home about 20 minutes from where I will be staying for the conference. So I will get to see him and meet some of my other cousins - and they will meet me and my son for the first time.

*Any plans to write any 'pure' fiction?*

Deciding to dedicate myself to writing creative nonfiction and delaying the dream of writing fiction was a conscious and carefully considered decision. At the time, I was in my middle twenties, and I realised that I didn't know enough about the world to write with the insight and experience necessary to make my novels and short stories culturally and morally significant. To be a better writer (and to be a better and a more well-rounded person) I realised the importance of learning to relate to others and understand the struggles and challenges of people from different walks of life. If the characters I created in my fiction were to be compelling and true, then, I concluded, I had to learn about other lifestyles, other professions and the patchwork of prejudices and kindnesses that make some people different from others. So I decided to write creative nonfiction, and in that way become more mature by broadening my scope of experiences. At some point, I would gradually

return to my literary roots - fiction - and make my impact on the world, I assumed. Perhaps you will think me naive, but I really thought that writers with something to say could affect the world. I still do, and I am still trying. Although I dreamed of being a novelist, I have never looked back or stopped to rethink my decision or direction. I continue my total involvement in the creative nonfiction experience - an odyssey that has consumed me and monumentally enriched my life.

*Donna Lee Brien teaches Creative Nonfiction in the Creative Writing programs at the Queensland University of Technology and is currently writing her PhD in the area of fictionalised biography. Her review of creative non fiction titles is published in this edition.*

## References

Interview created from email correspondence and conversations with Lee Gutkind, February - March 2000; his editorials in *Creative Nonfiction* (US journal) issues 1-12, 1993 on (<http://www.goucher.edu/cnf/journal/>); interview published in Amazon.com ([http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/show-interview/g-l-utkindee/ref=pm\\_dp\\_ln\\_b\\_8/104-5965920-8514000](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/show-interview/g-l-utkindee/ref=pm_dp_ln_b_8/104-5965920-8514000)); 'Why I chose the creative nonfiction way of life' (unpublished essay); and his books *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (John Wiley and Sons, 1997), and *Creative Nonfiction: How to Live it and Write It* (Chicago Review Press, 1996); and *Creative Nonfiction* website (<http://www.cnf.edu/>).

## Notes and Debate

Philip Neilsen and Donna Lee Brien

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## TEXT

Vol 4 No 1 April 2000

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au