

INTRODUCTION

THE PLACE WHERE THE REAL AND THE IMAGINED COINCIDES: AN INTRODUCTION TO AUSTRALIAN CREATIVE NONFICTION

Donna Lee Brien

creative (adverb) creating; able to create; inventive,
imaginative; showing imagination as well as routine skill.
nonfiction (noun) literary matter based directly on fact
(opp. novels etc.) [from the *Oxford English Dictionary*]

When in discussions in late 1999 it emerged that not only was Creative Nonfiction to be one of the main themes of Writing 2000, the fifth annual conference of the AAWP (Australian Association of Writing Programs), but that one of the keynote speakers for the conference would be Professor Lee Gutkind (pioneer of the teaching of this so-called 'fourth genre' in the USA), Nigel Krauth and I agreed that it seemed timely to gather together some Australian examples of this kind of writing.

This collection is the outcome - its aim to begin to reveal some of the variety and qualities of creative nonfiction as it is practiced in Australia. The contributors were not chosen as those we judged the 'best' or the 'most famous' proponents of what we defined as creative nonfiction, rather they are an interesting and wide-ranging (although modest) selection of writers who, we thought, could each bring something unique and different to this preliminary survey.

Creative nonfiction is currently a highly visible literary and publishing phenomenon in the United States (where creative nonfiction has been labelled 'the literature of reality', 'the literature of fact', 'the 'fourth genre', and 'real life stories'[1]) and is indeed described by Gutkind as more of a 'movement' than a genre. Australians have been writing creative nonfiction in various guises for decades, but it has not been identified as such. The advent of the creative nonfiction label, however, means that there is now a meaningful way to group, discuss and publish writing as diverse as memoir, fictionalised biography, autobiography and other lifewriting, some literary/New Journalism, the 'creative' essay, innovative self-aware critical fiction, and various forms of experimental and narrative/dramatised history writing. This list is in no way complete or definitive, as the term 'creative nonfiction' is expansive and very inclusive. This does not, however, preclude contestation of the term, with questions arising of how, for example, creative nonfiction differs from what we already understand as literary journalism or, even, fictocriticism, and even whether or not yet another literary descriptor is particularly useful.

From the inception of this project we sought to be non-prescriptive, rather than setting a concise (and limiting) definition to work from, we were interested in how each writer chose to interpret the term. The range of work represented by this modest number of pieces does begin to suggest the range and flexibility of the appellation. The contents page indicates an order for the contributions, but e-publishing enables the reader to browse and select an

author at a mouse click, and thus discover their own connections and resonances between the pieces. It is not easy to access and read longer pieces on the Internet, so we gave the authors a lower-end word limit (800 words), but perhaps we were too stingy, for most authors just went ahead and wrote lengthier works.

Each writer has, in their interpretation of creative nonfiction, taken a nonfiction subject and utilised creative strategies and structures to relate their factual material. How each writer has diverged from traditional nonfiction writing differs from work to work, but each of these pieces has in common the use of fictional techniques and/or an overtly subjective point-of-view in order to write something which is still nonfiction in aim, scope and realisation. This is the hallmark of successful creative nonfiction as otherwise, logically, the resulting work would be non-nonfiction, or fiction. To state this unambiguously, creative nonfiction must be nonfiction first and foremost, and the best creative nonfiction always emphasises the substance/content over the style. To quote Gutkind:

Here are people with something to say, which is at the cusp of the best creative nonfiction ... pre-eminent leaders in the field have chosen to emphasise the substance of their work over the style of their presentation ... that is not to say that style shouldn't be important to writers, but not at the expense of the message and the meaning.[2]

Thus, in none of the works in this collection has the ultimate aim of nonfiction writing (i.e. to somehow relate some real/factual/truthful material) been sacrificed to the creative method.

There is a current anxiety in Australia surrounding the notion of authenticity, and much heated debate regarding the ethics of appropriation - about stealing other's names, personae and cultural or intellectual property, about copyright, and about the precise meaning of words and phrases. Some of this debate is well-reasoned and well-intentioned, some is mean-spirited and motivated only by political desire, but all these questions are difficult to resolve. Creative nonfiction does not seek to subvert in any way the truth-telling aspirations of nonfiction, nor does it blend fact and fiction (not caring if the connection to the real is distorted in the process) or utilise fiction to somehow 'spice up' dry factual material. The mongrel terms *docu-drama*, *true fiction*, *factual story*, *fact-based novel*, *nonfiction novel*, *research fiction* and (the particularly nasty) *faction* are often used to describe such departures from narrow definitions of fiction but, apart from being ugly, these hybrid terms are relatively worthless for, as we know, very little fiction is not based on some wider reality and it has long been accepted that nonfiction can never be 'pure' fact. As such, we realise that creative nonfiction is a 'descriptive' as much as a defining term.

Creative nonfiction writes a more discursive, more subjective, more organic, less straightforwardly linear nonfiction. As can be seen in this collection, this type of writing is particularly suited to a focus on the personal, on human values and ethical issues, on a sense of the self in action, and on material which deals with emotional content in a way that texts which aim to be totally objective may not be able to. Creative nonfiction is thus the perfect vehicle for the writer who wishes to reveal the impossibility of any immaculate objectivity when it comes to writing nonfiction, and instead wants/needs to revel in a subjective approach. In creative nonfiction subjectivity is not hidden, but is rather one of the foundations of the approach.

It must also be stated that the weakest (and most annoying) creative nonfiction portrays an overbearing 'I', where the author's subjectivity overshadows the subject being discussed. Even the 'I' of the memoirist can become egocentrically overbearing [3] and, perhaps even worse, boring. The best memoir relates information about the author, but as Michael Wilding (who has long used himself and his life as subjects for his fiction and prefers to write about what he calls 'authentic experience') has said, in memoir 'you are trying to record accurately the details of what happened ... to strictly and literally transcribe people'. [4] Wilding's 'War and Pacifism' as memoir thus charts the development of his political

awareness and his faltering 'first step into literary ability, first participation in the machinery of literary production', but also provides an accurate picture of a wartime childhood: aircraft spotting and gardening for England.

Creative nonfiction is particularly suited to relating such historically-based narratives. Patrick Buckridge, a scholar of Renaissance literature who has published several articles in recent years on the 'Shakespeare Authorship Debate', has used the form to continue his argument for Sir Edward Dyer (1543-1607) as the principal author of the Shakespeare canon. This piece is an attempt to evoke, by means of a fictional 'fleshing out', the cultural and political milieux that gave rise to the performance and publication of the Shakespearean drama, and to give 'the Bard' a voice.

The notion of the voices that can be constructed in creative nonfiction drives Brien's work in the area of fictionalised biography. Faced with the dilemma of how to write about an artist's motivations and personal life when the documentary evidence is sparse - in this case, when the details could be summarily reduced to a dry paragraph - John Power's biographer has chosen to relate her subject's life by way of a woman who was absolutely central to his story, his mother. The construction of Mary Power's fictionalised (but fully researched) voice allows one of the seminal forces involved in the formation of an artistic character to be explored, together with a recognition of how historical reality provides the arena in which all character is formed and action is played out.

Author Gary Crew reveals how he began with a fascinating moment in history, that fateful day - 4th June, 1629 - when the Dutch vessel *Batavia* struck rocks off the coast of *Terra Australis* (what is now Western Australia) and foundered. Over 300 passengers and crew survived by clambering up on a coral outcrop, but 120 were subsequently murdered by their peers. The accused were tried and two of them castaway on what is now known as the mainland of Australia and left to die, but there is evidence that they survived. Crew relates how he researched and reconstructed the aftermath of that wreck and the lives of the two castaways in his multiple award-winning novel *Strange Objects*. In this piece we learn about the author, the process of research and inspiration, and we are left with an innovative discursive bibliography to *Strange Objects*.

This is not to suggest that creative nonfiction writes only about the past. While Antoni Jach's most recent novel, *Layers of the City*, is a researched poetic contemplation of history and ancestry as much as an analysis of the present, his piece for this collection 'No 50. The Problem of the City', is a meditation on such inescapably unpoetic aspects of contemporary life as ecological and environmental disaster, squashed Native Title rights, and the alienation and dehumanisation of urban life. 'When you walk around the city you get the feeling that the people are in slow motion - but the buildings are growing up awfully fast, eating up the available airspace at an enormous rate.' Embedded in a series of blackly, almost-humorous, cameos is a serious discussion of how we have given cars precedence over the human in the city and destroyed the environment. 'We could leave the city for its original inhabitants,' Jach writes. 'We could say we took your land away, now we are returning it. Look at how we have covered your hills with mighty fine grey concrete and black bitumen, dammed up your river and torn out your trees... Pity about the mess, but that's Progress!' Creative nonfiction has political and social, as well as aesthetic, potential.

Crew, Day, Krauth and Wilding write about writing. Perhaps, if creative nonfiction does provide an avenue for 'the writer's singular voice as an active participant in his or her own experience'[5], then it should be obvious that the literary life will be of immediate relevance to a creative nonfiction author.

By describing a series of imagined and actual journeys, Marele Day charts some of the process by which she became a writer. From reading *Girls Own Annual* and *Blinky Bill* and imagining being elsewhere through the coloured worlds of the atlas, to actual travel abroad and the discovery that what was told in books could be real, what was important for her development as an author (whose ability to portray a sense of place is remarkable) was both

the details of the places imagined and the imagining. For Day, what was central was the recognition that: 'We need to have faith in words because they map the world for us'; and that literature is a 'place where the real and the imagined coincide'. A working definition for the creative nonfiction in this collection, perhaps?

Stated rather grandly, we hope that one of the results of this collection is to open up discussion and further the definition and practice of creative nonfiction writing in Australia. Krauth gets right to the point in his 'A Ticket to Albany', charting his own denial and then the genesis of his emergent interest in creative nonfiction. At last year's mammoth AWP conference in Albany, New York, he walks into the huge display room and finds himself in discussion with a publisher of Creative Nonfiction magazines. 'We do this stuff in Australia,' [he says] ... 'We don't call it Creative Nonfiction. We call it writing.'

Notes

1. See Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1997; Theodore A. Rees Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, 1991; Michael Steinberg, Robert L. Root and Robert Root Jr, *The Fourth Genre, Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, Allyn & Bacon, USA, 1998; Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*, Story Press, USA, 1999. Return to article
2. Lee Gutkind, 'Why I Chose the Creative Nonfiction Way of Life', unpublished essay. Return to article
3. Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*, 69. Return to article
4. Donna Lee Brien, 'Interview with Michael Wilding'. *Imago: New Writing*, Vol 11 No 2 (1999):16. Return to article
5. Editorial review of Michael Steinberg et al. In Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0205275958/qid%3D954806674/104-7350097-3227643> accessed 1 March 2000. Return to article

Donna Lee Brien teaches Creative Nonfiction in the Creative Writing program at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia and is currently completing her PhD in the area of fictionalised biography. Her biography of John Power, Recollection, will be published this year by Modern Writing Press, Melbourne.

TEXT Special Issue Website

No 1 April 2000

Australian Creative Nonfiction, edited by Donna Lee Brien & Nigel Krauth

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

General Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au