

A short essay on the nature of Creative Nonfiction by writer Christina Baldwin

From WIWA member Dan McGuire, a provocative question: *As a semi-novice, I'm curious about a phrase that I've seen in a number of lists. What exactly is "creative" nonfiction?*

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I have been teaching creative nonfiction for thirty years and am quite aware of the dilemma inherent in the name of this genre. And as both a teacher and writer, I've had to explore this dilemma countless times. So here's my current understanding:

Creative nonfiction is writing that has broken free from the legal requirements of courtroom testimony (*"the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God..."*) and from the restrictions and expectations of journalism (*who/what/when/where/why and how...*) and yet remains solidly tethered to the writer's personal experience. The life experience being explored in a piece of creative nonfiction needs to have actually happened: I grew up in Minnesota. My parents' divorce sent me into the stories of their marriage. My brother served in Vietnam while I served in the peace movement. I have two adopted stepchildren... As a reader, you need to be able to trust that all this is true, that it represents a factual reality and structure in my life and in my story. That's the nonfiction part.

The creative part is where the dilemma gets activated: in this genre the writer will sometimes combine several characters into one, or disguise certain defining characteristics, to protect personal identities of those who may not be thrilled to find themselves in someone else's published work, or to protect the writer from libel, or to simplify the story. The writer may take memory of an event and augment it with details that make for better writing without actually remembering whether the tablecloth in a certain scene was checkered or flowered, or if I was eating spaghetti or lasagna when my college boyfriend broke up with me. Or I may combine several visits to the family homestead into one trip. The goal in creative nonfiction for the writer is to make meaning out of raw experience, to donate one's life to creative process and come up with something slightly different—the story of what happened. Crafting story provides us with a way to make peace with experience. When this insight occurs for the writer, the personal tale becomes a universal teacher—and just as we were compelled to write it, we may now desire to share it. Story is a map: the story that gets one person through helps to get another person through. This is the great promise of creative nonfiction: story informs and enlightens the human condition. And to serve each other in that way, requires we cut a little slack around the edges of literal truth.

In my book, *Storycatcher, Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, I address the dilemma this way: "We understand that story is not the gospel truth, or journalism, or courtroom testimony. Story is life ...slightly distorted by personal experience, perception, inclination, and fancy. This is the nature of story. The fish gets a little bigger, the storm gets a little wilder, the love gets a little stronger, our bravery or disappointment gets a little exaggerated. There is creative tension in story. When we hear it, when we read it, when we speak it, when we write it, we filter words through our own experiences and our need for meaning."

And it is this legacy of meaning-making that most inspires me as a writer and a reader. I am in awe of people's abilities to mine the territory of their lives for meaning, to go into very dark places with a candle of courage and take us with them and show us our own capacity to spin life's straw into gold. "What is truer than truth?" is asked in Hasidic tradition—and the answer: "the story."

Christina Baldwin is the author of several books on journal writing, story, and taught memoir and creative nonfiction for over 30 years. For more information see: www.christinabaldwin.com.