

Literary Nonfiction

By Libby Sommer

There are many ways to describe the genre we call Literary Nonfiction. It is a genre that is given many different names. Some of these names are: Creative Nonfiction, Narrative Nonfiction, Literary Journalism, Imaginative Nonfiction, Lyric Essay, Personal Essay, Personal Narrative, and Literary Memoir. Literary Nonfiction is sometimes thought of as another way of writing fiction, because of the way writing changes the way we know a subject.

Author Barrie Jean Borich describes it as memory-or-fact-based writing that makes use of the styles and elements of fiction, poetry, memoir, and essay. It is writing about and from a world that includes the author's life and/or the author's eye on the lives of others.

Literary Nonfiction is a form that uses memory, experience, observation, opinion, and all kinds of research.

What connects all these methods is that the "I", the literary version of the author, is always present—the author is in the work. Be the style straight-forward like a newspaper feature, narrative like a novel, or metaphorical like a poem.

Essayist, memoirist, and prima donna of nonfiction prose style Annie Dillard has said she writes to "fashion a text". Dorothy Allison has used the stories of her life in both fiction and nonfiction in order, she's written, "to save my life".

Helen Garner once described writers as "voracious monsters, ravaging beasts who roam the world seeking whom and what we may devour." According to journalist Kate Legge, this desire to preserve or capture something strange, something intriguing, may override respect for privacy or dignity, restraint or caution.

Writers such as Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion are interested in bringing the presence of an individual awareness to their work, acknowledging that the writer is incapable of complete subjectivity and is constantly interpreting what he or she observes. From this practice we've received innumerable prototypes of the ways to translate interviews and research into a variety that looks like the storytelling and dramatic movement of fiction and the language and rhythms of poetry.

In this postmodern world of imagined biography and fictional memoir, it's harder than ever to tell what is made up from what is real. It is said that every author steals, begs or borrows



from life. British novelist Julian Barnes says, “If you’ve been told a story by a friend or something happens in your family; it’s all fair game.”

Kate Legge points out that writers may distort the physical likeness, tone of voice, occupation or age of their characters to preserve friendships and avoid libel suits. They might ask permission from the source before publishing. Or they might stomp ahead and be summoned to account, as Frank Moorhouse was when his ex-wife outed a thinly disguised version of her life that he’d pillaged “without care for the consequences”.

According to Vivian Gornick, “A memoir is a tale taken from life—that is, from actual, not imagined, occurrences—related by a first-person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story: to shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader.” Critic Chris Anderson claims that the genre can be understood best by splitting it into two subcategories—the personal essay and the journalistic essay—but the genre is currently defined by its lack of established conventions.

Barrie Jean Borich agrees with Annie Dillard in saying that Literary Nonfiction writing is first about the formation of a text, the creation of a piece of art, just like any painting or musical composition. “Your life and the life of the world is your raw material, as much a part of the mix as is the paint, the chords, the words. Your subjects might be any part of this world.”

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Libby Sommer, whose work of Literary Nonfiction, *My Year With Sammy*, has been accepted for publication by Ginninderra Press.