

Re-creating Lives: The Possibilities and Limits of Creative Nonfiction

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years creative nonfiction has emerged around the world as a genre highly popular with both publishers and readers. Some compelling examples have helped redefine how experience and actuality can be imaginatively narrated and have freed nonfiction writers from previous constraints. As a reader I relish these innovative texts; as a writer I have tried to make use of some of the new freedoms. Most of the controversy surrounding the genre has centred on accuracy and ethics in memoir: now that the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is no longer so heavily policed, how far can a writer go? Indeed, does anything now go? This paper explores outstanding recent examples of life writing but also disturbing instances; it also examines a variety of views among memoirists about the role of the imagined in life writing. While recognising that the notion of a unitary and stable self is a fiction, I take issue with what I see as postmodern legitimisation of assumed identities and argue that, when this is extended even to fake Holocaust memoirs, it risks fuelling Holocaust revisionism and denial.

Keywords: life writing; creative nonfiction; memoir; Holocaust memoir; fake memoir

Creative Nonfiction (CNF), the subject of this paper, is a curious term exported from the USA over the past 15 years or so—curious in that it defines a genre by what it is not. It is curious, too, in being both an oxymoron and a tautology: an oxymoron because creative writing and nonfiction are usually defined in opposition to each other rather than conjoined, and a tautology because all writing is—or should be—creative.

CNF came to prominence as part of the Master of Fine Arts programmes that are so popular in the USA. It is a hybrid, supposedly bringing together aspects of fiction and nonfiction: nonfiction's focus on real-life events and experiences—things that have actually taken place—with some of the features and characteristics of fiction such as storytelling and narrative, characters, scenes and dialogue.

We could do worse than use the American writer David Foster Wallace's definition:

As nonfiction, the works are connected to actual states of affairs in the world, are "true" to some reliable extent. If, for example, a certain event is alleged to have occurred, it must really have occurred; if a proposition is asserted, the reader expects some proof of (or argument for) its accuracy. At the same time, the adjective *creative* signifies that some goal(s) other than sheer truthfulness motivates the writer and informs her work [...] *Creative* also suggests that this kind of

nonfiction tends to bear traces of its own artifice; the essay's author usually wants us to see and understand her as the text's maker. (Foster Wallace [2003] 2014)

This approach has been deployed in a variety of texts, from life writing (biography, autobiography and memoir), travel writing, nature writing, science writing, crime writing, sports writing to history. Over the past 20 years it has emerged around the world as one of the most popular genres among both publishers and readers. For a recent chapter on the cancer memoir (Karpf 2013a), for example, I read twenty-five examples (and there were plenty more that I could have selected).

The most compelling examples of CNF have helped redefine how experience and actuality can be imaginatively narrated. CNF isn't new—life writing has been traced back to St Augustine, whose *Confessions* are widely considered the first Western autobiography (Augustine 430 AD), and Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), while Orwell (1933, 1937 and 1938) and Capote (1966) were renowned 20th century exponents. But in its more recent manifestations it allows writers to explore the most personal, individual and intimate stories while also providing a means through which readers can hook their own, quite different experience: many of the best of them have this dual quality—a manifest story and a meta one. So Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014) is both the story of the training of a falcon (a subject in which—at least before I read her eloquent book—I had absolutely no interest) and what you might call a biography of bereavement (a subject in which I am mightily interested): the story of how, through her experiences with the falcon, she came to terms with the death of her father.

Or there is Paul Auster, who audaciously wrote his memoir *Winter Journal* entirely in the second person. This is how it starts:

You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else.

Your bare feet on the cold floor as you walk to the window. You are six years old. Outside snow is falling. (2012, 1)

How masterfully the second person shifts: in the first paragraph (“you think it will never happen to you”) the reader assumes that the writer is addressing them personally, addressing their narcissism, their sense that somehow they alone can escape the intolerable realities of the human condition before discovering that life will eventually have its way with them—only for the second person to shift in the second paragraph (“your bare feet on the cold floor”) to Auster's own memories. But by then it is too late: he has already locked the reader's memory into his own—writer and reader are hopelessly entangled.

Other examples of CNF create new ways of seeing and speaking. *The Iceberg* by Marion Coutts (2014), a memoir of her husband's diagnosis and eventual death from a brain tumour (he also wrote a memoir about his cancer called *Until Further Notice I am Alive* [2012]), is a stunning account of how an individual and a family can remain fully themselves until his final breath. By turns beautiful and shocking (and often both at the same time), this memoir finds a fresh voice through which to describe the process of accompanying a loved one to the grave. Coutts is an artist and her book is characterised by its close observation of experience:

Spring. There is going to be destruction: the obliteration of a person, his intellect, his experience and his agency. I am to watch it. This is my part. There is no deserv-ing or undeserving. There is no better and no worse. Cold has pained the

ground for months. Now the garden is bursting and splitting. From the window each morning I mark the naked clay ceding to green. I am against lyricism, against the spring, against all growth, against all fantasies, against all nature. Blast growth and all the things that grow. It is irrelevant, stupid, a waste. As nature is indifferent to me, so am I to it. (2014, 90)

Growth as connected with spring and renewal but also, in case of a brain tumour, with death.

The rest of this paper could be devoted to compelling passages from innovative recent examples of CNF, but this would be to ignore the more problematic aspects of this flourishing genre. For, while there are countless examples of brilliant writing, its sheer proliferation, especially in the field of life writing, deserves some attention. As someone—I can't recall or trace whom—once astringently observed “everyone has a life, but does everyone have to write about it?” The answer increasingly seems to be yes.

The number and range of memoirs suggest that something distinctive is going on. On one level it can be read as simply an example of the democratisation of discourse: where once you needed to be a prominent politician, actor, celebrity or military figure to be thought to merit a biography or autobiography, now the lives of ordinary people are the subject-matter of memoir. In this sense the growth of life writing can be seen as a parallel development to the emergence of oral history in the 1960s, 70s and 80s: giving voice to the voiceless.

Yet this is too simple a formulation. The explosion of memoirs seems to be in some way connected with the growth of that much-maligned phenomenon called identity politics. The notion that we each possess a unique, individual sensibility is a relatively recent belief—in part driven by Freudianism and the growth of psychoanalysis. The philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that modern identity is characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and capacity for authenticity—that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself (Taylor 1994). The political theorist Sonia Kruks went further:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different. (2001, 85)

Much of the appeal of the modern memoir—and its attraction for my own students, it seems to me—lies in its potential to provide them with this kind of recognition and validation. Whether they get published or not (but especially if they do), committing their lives to paper provides them with a kind of legitimation: not so much writing-as-therapy, a cathartic process through which they can free themselves from difficult experiences or toxic events, but more writing-as-acknowledgement, by which they can persuade other people to see them through the prism of a disadvantaged identity or an experience of suffering.

Cynics dismiss this as a variant of the culture of complaint or the search for victimhood. Certain there has been an inflation of the kind of suffering required to make your mark in the crowded ‘misery lit’ market, redolent of the famous Monty Python sketch in which Four Yorkshiremen compete for victimhood, culminating in the account by one of them of “working twenty-nine hours a day down mill [...] and when we got home, our Dad would kill us, and dance about on our graves singing ‘Hallelujah’.”

This hilarious scenario of spiralling absurdist misery actually has something serious to tell us about a paradox: that ordinary lives increasingly need to exhibit extraordinary characteristics and depict extreme situations to get attention, thereby running the risk of marginalising them—at least in publishing terms—once again (even if the ubiquity of the blog now makes each of us potentially our own publisher and thus provides a way of bypassing traditional forms of publishing).

The emphasis on feelings as a marker of authenticity is also relatively recent. As Richard Sennett has noted, “before the 19th Century, the realm close to the self was not thought to be a realm for the expression of unique or distinctive personality; the private and the individual were not yet wedded. The peculiarities of individual feeling had as yet no social form because, instead, the realm close to the self was ordered by natural, ‘universal’ human sympathies” ([1977] 1993, 89).

Yet Philip Lopate, who teaches creative nonfiction at Columbia, has remarked upon the fact that his students today want to write *only* about their feelings and are highly resistant to his attempts to get them to use their minds, intellects and curiosity as the driver of their writing. He suggests that this is in part because of their fear of appearing judgmental, but I want to suggest that it is also because authenticity is seen increasingly to lie exclusively in the realm of affect: it is only through the display of powerful emotions that, it is often believed, we can lay claim to authenticity and individuality, indeed personhood.

Yet there is something else in operation here too. Writing about his own work, Lopate has observed that “the more I took to writing personal essays, the more experienced I became in projecting in print the appearance of a stable, unitary self—a core around which the different elected tonalities of the moment could spin [...] writing is the way of self-making” (Lopate 2013, 92; 100).

This recalls the claim by the British writer, Alan Bennett, that “you don’t put yourself in what you write, you find yourself there” (2005, 545). In an era when identity has become both so problematised and destabilised, perhaps writing offers the hope—the chimerica?—of creating some kind of ongoing self, with all the contours and heft of individuality.

Of course it is a forlorn hope, one that writing can never fulfil. The cancer patient, for example, who yearns to somehow distance themselves from their illness by transforming it into a text, a vehicle that they can shape and so reassert a measure of control, invariably reaches a point of recognition—either in print or their life—that writing about cancer cannot cure it (see Karpf 2013a). The life writer can only go so far: their life or illness escapes the confines of the page or screen and resolutely refuses to be tamed by words.

CNF, however, has become a problematic genre not just on account of its popularity or the fantasies that it excites but which it cannot ultimately deliver. CNF’s hybridity has attracted fevered debate ever since the publication of *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999), Edmund Morris’s biography of President Ronald Reagan which included fictional elements, as well as a semi-fictional character coming from the same town as Ronald Reagan who went by the name of Edmund Morris himself. (This, of course, had already become a recurring feature of the postmodern novel: remember Martin Amis [1984] writing himself into his novel *Money* as a minor character?).

The heated controversy that *Dutch* generated when it was first published tells us something about where the boundary between fiction and nonfiction lay at the end of the 20th century. Yet, incrementally, such techniques have become normalised. I have made use of some of the new freedoms available to non-fiction writers in my own writing, albeit in

pretty tame fashion compared with Morris. In my memoir, *The War After* ([1996] 2008), for instance, I sandwiched a densely-researched and heavily-footnoted section in between chapters of highly personal memoir. It was first published in 1996 by when, I had assumed, we were all postmodern enough to be able to accommodate such contrasting narratives within a single whole. I was wrong: some reviewers were thrown by it and signalled their discomfort in different ways.

Authors have taken up a variety of positions about just how creative you can be in CNF. Edmund White places himself in the absolutist camp. “I hate the phrase ‘creative nonfiction.’ It sounds like a synonym for lying. You have to tell the truth when you’re writing what purports to be memoir” (White 2016).

Dave Eggers in his tour-de-force *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), published just a year after *Dutch*, refused this kind of distinction and got away with it—partly because he was not writing about an American president, only about himself, but also because he made a feature of his slipperiness, gleefully importing the unreliable narrator from fiction into nonfiction. “The author would [...] like to acknowledge his propensity to exaggerate. And his propensity to fib in order to make himself look better, or worse, whichever serves his purpose at the time” (2000, xxxix). Eggers’s defence was his hyperbole and playfulness.

Geoff Dyer, one of the most successful British creative nonfiction authors, is also entirely unapologetic. “All that matters is that the reader can’t see the joins, that there is no textural change between reliable fabric and fabrication. In other words, the issue is not accuracy but aesthetics” (Dyer et al. 2015).

Karl Ove Knausgaard calls his books ‘autobiographical novels’ and refuses the distinction between the two words, seeing their marriage as essentially harmonious. “For me there has been no difference in remembering something and creating something... It was like I was writing a straight novel when I was writing this but the rule was that it had to be true. Not true in an objective sense but the way I remember it. There’s a lot of false memory in the book but it’s there because it’s the way it is, it’s real” (in Dyer et al. 2015).

Here reality is elided entirely with subjectivity and subjectivity trumps—sorry—any form of verification. It rather akin to what the American satirist Stephen Colbert called ‘truthiness,’ a word he coined during George W Bush’s presidency. “It used to be,” he maintained, that “everyone was entitled to their opinion but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It’s certainty” (in Schudson 2009, 107). He was writing, of course, before the 2016 American election, which seems to have marked the moment where truthiness became deproblematized.

So where does this take us? Listen to James Frey’s disclaimer, after the fictional elements of his supposed memoir *A Million Little Pieces* were exposed:

I embellished many details about my past experiences, and altered others in order to serve what I felt was the greater purpose of the book...I made other alterations in my portrayal of myself, most of which portrayed me in ways that made me tougher and more daring and aggressive than in reality I was, or I am. There is much debate now about the respective natures of works of memoir, nonfiction, and fiction... I believe, and I understand that others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. (Frey 2003, note to reader in reprint)

On the one hand this appears to be a *mea culpa*—but at the same time it appeals to the primacy of feeling. See how feeling is invoked here as a justification for deliberate dishonesty, and impression is cited rather than impression-management. Frey certainly created a stable, unitary self—and it was one seemingly pretty far from the self that he was saddled with: but if I feel this is true, he suggested, that is legitimacy enough.

When it comes to the Holocaust, such a stance becomes even more problematic. Consider the case of one Mischa Defonseca, the author of a fake memoir of the Second World War. She was later ordered to pay \$22.5m (£13.3m) back to her publisher for her book (1997) describing a frankly inconceivable, not to say preposterous, sequence of events that supposedly unfolded after the author, aged six, set off across Belgium, Germany and Poland to find her Jewish parents who had been captured by the Nazis and en-route was adopted by a pack of wolves—a kind of Anne Frank meets the Jungle Book.

The story was a huge bestseller but in 2008 was found to have been fabricated. The author, who was not Jewish and whose real name was Monique De Wael, insisted that “it’s not the true reality, but it is my reality [...]. Ever since I can remember, I felt Jewish” (Flood 2014).

Or there is the case of the black activist Rachel Dolezal who, it transpired, was actually born white. She tried to make an analogy with Caitlyn Jenner and suggested that it was possible to be ‘trans-race’ (although her case was not exactly strengthened by the fact that in 2002 she had sued Howard University, a historically black institution, for allegedly discriminating against her because she was white. She lost the case). In her defence she claimed that “[a]s long as I can remember, I saw myself as black” (McGreal 2015).

Closer to home, for me, was the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski. In 1998 *The Guardian* sent me to interview (Karpf 1998) Binjamin Wilkomirski, author of an acclaimed supposed Holocaust memoir by a child survivor of Majdanek (Wilkomirski 1997), who was later unearthed as Bruno Dösseker, b. Bruno Grosjean, and a Protestant from Switzerland.

I was moved by both book and author, despite some fleeting concerns that I did not allow more than whispering room for reasons that I elaborate elsewhere (Karpf 2013b). (It is hard to recover these on exactly the scale that they struck me at the time, so tempting is it to place oneself retrospectively in the ‘doubters’ camp.) One’s reading of any text is shaped by many factors: in this case, mine could be said to have been overdetermined. The book arrived already lionised as a memoir, which seemed a guarantor of its facticity. Its very fragmentariness seemed to mimic the broken nature of memory and in particular a child’s memory, lending it further authenticity. We also need to remember that it was 1998: this was the Holocaust story, perhaps, that was yearned for as the century in which the Holocaust took place was drawing to a close—the story of the child who survived what Anne Frank did not, who could take the ‘late born’ into the next century and which, with its impressionistic structure and absence of strict chronology, constituted the perfect ‘postmodern’ text.

Yet listen to how Leslie Morris characterised Wilkomirski’s book and similar fake Holocaust memoirs. Such texts, she wrote are “poised between fact and fiction; experience and imagination; the immediacy of lived, remembered experience and mediated, transmitted, imagined memory [...]” (Morris 2002, 293). Drawing on Andrea Liss’s notion of ‘post-memory’ (Liss 1998) which was later developed by Marianne Hirsch (2012), she argues that “postmemory takes as a given that the nature of memory itself is mediated [well, of course], never transparent [yes to this too] [...]” (Morris 2002, 293). It is worth quoting this at length:

This notion of postmemory insists on the impossibility of a transparent relationship to the past and to language, announcing itself as artifact, as mediated between the various layers and levels of memory - experiential and textual. Postmemory, as I am using the term, is memory that cannot be traced back to the Urtext of experience, but rather unfolds as part of an ongoing process of intertextuality, translation, metonymic substitution, and a constant interrogation of the nature of the original. (Morris 2002, 293)

She calls these ‘postmemoirs.’ “Memoirs as postmemoirs—such as those by Wilkomirski—all point to their own status (and failed status) as memoir, thus signaling their participation in the elegiac mourning for the loss of viability of poetic and narrative form” (Morris 2002, 293).

Excuse me?

It gets worse: The discursive space of ‘the Holocaust’ (now in inverted commas) “now encompasses texts that explore the uncertainty of authorship, experience and identity and the slippage not only between national and ethnic identities, but also between fact and fiction, between trauma and recovery, between Jew and non-Jew, and between victim and perpetrator” (Morris 2002, 294).

So here we have it: the postmodern Holocaust, the Holocaust reduced to simulacrum—parallel to Baudrillard’s “the Gulf War did not exist,” this in some sense is the Holocaust that did not exist.

Morris happily continues: “Not only does the breakdown of form point to the post-modern mantra of the historicity of narrative and the narrativity of history, but even more significantly [...] the Wilkomirski’s case, in [...] [its] apparently blatant disregard for the ‘author,’ raises the question of what happens to truth claims when they are made by a fictive, invented Jewish subject” (Morris 2002, 300-301).

I think I can answer that: they are fictive and invented, and fuel Holocaust denial. Call me old-fashioned if you will—I am certainly not a positivist (a post-post-modernist maybe?), but I do not think that Wilkomirski was exploring the uncertainty of authorship, or the slippage between Jew and non-Jew, between victim and perpetrator: he was a non-Jew and a lying one, who tried to appropriate other people’s experiences for his own purposes and found—for a multiplicity of reasons—a willing public. I have written recently (Karpf 2017b) about the growing phenomenon of ‘victim envy,’ the envy of victimhood and its appropriation by people who use it as a place to park their own sense of grievance. Wilkomirski is surely a prime example.

I have re-read Morris’s characterisation of ‘postmemoir’ a number of times, hoping somehow to find in it a formulation I can live with. She is describing the discursive space of the Holocaust, after all—and I understand this. I also understand something that she does not dwell on, which is that Fonseca and Wilkomirski’s books were published just at the point where the Holocaust was emerging out from 50 years of relative invisibility: it thus became culturally available as a trope for suffering (Young 1988) while offering a valuable identity in the also simultaneously emerging identity wars.

But the idea that Wilkomirski’s text is part of a continuum whereby truth bleeds into fiction does a terrible disservice not only to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust but also to the historians and archivists working to produce the most accurate accounts possible. It also risks fuelling Holocaust revisionism and denial.

Morris's formulation reminds me of Clemenceau's discussion in the 1920s of who bore responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. According to Hannah Arendt, when he was asked what future historians would think about it, Clemenceau replied: "This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany" (Arendt [1967] 2003, 554).

Of course all texts are problematic. Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, in a brilliant recent book, have forensically analysed the Scrolls of Auschwitz, testimony written by members of the Sonderkommando—those Jews required to transport the bodies of Jews from the gas chambers to the ovens (Chare and Williams 2016). They have shown how, even in extremis, with the urgent need to bear witness, these writers were making decisions concerning style and address which it is appropriate to investigate and which, indeed, enhance our understanding and appreciation of how remarkable these documents are. We should not, therefore, allow the sensitivity of the subject matter to close off discussion of approach, form and register.

I am not arguing, either, that we sacralise the Holocaust or embalm it. On the contrary, as Maurice Halbwachs remarked, "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localise their memories [...] the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1993, 38; 40). Halbwachs placed individual memory always in collective memory and social frameworks—an approach that his translator called 'presentist' (Halbwachs 1993, 25). Indeed I would go so far as to argue that as the 'remembering self' changes so, naturally, does the 'remembered self.' If we reject the idea of the unitary, stable self then we also see that memoir must inevitably be provisional and subject to revision.

So common has this repeated self-presentation become that it has acquired its own moniker, the 'serial memoir.' According to Stamant, this developed in the second half of the 20th century in tandem with postmodern thought and changes in technology. "It is a postmodern form of self-representation: relational, experimental, historical and permanently shifting [...] Serial memoir is a textual, material manifestation of a larger serial culture, marking a crucial shift in how people understand themselves and narrate their life stories" (Stamant 2014, 2).

Yet, while I accept the argument that memoir is always contingent, its production located in a particular historical and cultural moment, and that the life story is always an interpretive process, rather than the product of a stable entity or selfhood; while I believe that we need to defend memoir as a living, breathing form (Karpf 2017a), I refuse to go down the Leslie Morris route. I do not believe that Defonseca and Wilkomirski signalled their 'participation in the elegiac mourning for the loss of viability of poetic and narrative form.' On the contrary, I think they falsely laid claim to those forms and, in so doing, tried to reify rather than deconstruct them: to return to Foster Wallace's definition quoted above, these authors try to efface and not embrace their own artifice. The angry reaction by readers and survivors to their unmasking suggests that these, too, have some lingering faith in the viability of those forms.

To conclude: not all experience is a mirage; not all narrative forms play a part in their own immolation. We need to resist the defactualisation of the memoir as much as we contest what Arendt (1972) called the defactualisation of politics.

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