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## LITERARY NONFICTION:

### *What Makes It Distinctive?*

*What it is. Why it isn't fiction. How it differs from journalism. Contrasts with reports and scholarly writing. Popular misconceptions.*

“Literary writing” and “creative writing” are used interchangeably. At first glance, the terms may seem too broad to be helpful. Surely all writing is “literary” in that it is presented in words and sentences. And all writing is “creative” since it requires some degree of imagination.

But these two phrases have taken on a particular meaning. They describe a **genre** that, while as old as literature itself, has blossomed with renewed popularity in the past 20 years. Many readers (and even some writers) are needlessly confused about how to define this genre. It's simpler than one might think. Literary nonfiction is distinguished by three basic characteristics: It is based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with a special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of nonfiction writing.

These three characteristics are important because they save a great deal of futile argument. They explain the difference between literary nonfiction and other types of prose writing, such as **fiction**, journalism, factual reports, and academic scholarship. They also help us to identify short works that are sometimes published as literary nonfiction but are actually no more than journal entries.

### Why It Isn't Fiction

There is a definable line between literary nonfiction and **fiction**. True, some short stories and novels that draw heavily on actual events and characters seem like nonfiction. But the fiction writer's approach is significantly different. As a result, readers respond with different assumptions. No matter how fully the fiction writer has used actual events, characters, or places, he or she is in no way committed to sticking to those facts. Fiction writers almost always

revise and alter details from experience or research to such a degree that in the end a reader can scarcely separate what was taken from life and what was invented. Actual events and characters may have been a starting point, but they are only a means to an end. The end is a good story.

The difference between fiction and literary nonfiction is essentially a matter of commitment: the fiction writer is committed to creating a work of art known as a story or a novel. Nothing else matters. Occasionally the material is created entirely from imagination; but more often it is made up of fragments from life. Fictional characters can and often are based on more than one model. A character may be given the hot temper of one person, the life style of another, and the political convictions of a third. The setting may be a composite of several places, and the actual events altered to meet the need of the work. The writer creates something entirely new, borrowing from the rubble of reality. Even when fiction writers use their friends and family as models, their loyalty is to the fictional creation.

Writers of literary or creative nonfiction, on the other hand, are faithful to actual people, places, and events. Such writers have the freedom to select what to emphasize and what to ignore, and they often reveal their own feelings, but they maintain a loyalty to those they describe or quote, to the setting, and to what really happened.

## How It Differs from Journalism

Journalism stresses accuracy above all else. Reporters have been fired for creating fictional characters and pretending to quote from them.

Partly because of the emphasis on accuracy, the approach is generally less personal than that in literary nonfiction. News reporting traditionally doesn't reveal the emotions of the reporter. Even though newspapers now encourage reporters to open with a "soft" paragraph about how the event affected a participant or onlooker before turning to the facts, reporters are not free to express their own feelings or reactions. They can't write "I knew at once he was guilty," or "I felt sick to my stomach."

The style of journalism tends to be straightforward, essentially utilitarian. It does not generally use literary devices such as fresh and original **metaphors** or **prose rhythms**. It rarely if ever creates **symbolic** suggestions. It almost never indulges in wry **understatement** or **irony**. Generally speaking, journalism sticks to the facts.

Writers of literary nonfiction, on the other hand, tend to be more personal, sharing their reactions, opinions, and feelings; and they are usually more concerned with an interesting use of language. This doesn't mean decorating the work with needless **similes** and **metaphors** or adding a few symbolic details to make it sound elegant. But it does allow writers to suggest by implication more than they state. Often this means using **figurative language**, such as metaphors and similes.

Here, for example, is how a reporter might begin a local story.

Mildred Gray of 238 Canal St. stared in disbelief as flames leapt from her apartment window three stories above her. The fire, of suspicious origin, broke out at 1:35 A.M., rousing some 23 residents, forcing them to the street. The fire department was not notified until 2:02.

If the event was described by a writer of literary nonfiction, it would probably be handled in a looser, more personal style, perhaps like this:

I was stunned into silence when I first saw two dozen people on the street, some in bathrobes or wrapped in blankets, staring at flames leaping from their apartment house. My first reaction was rage: this was the very building the notorious landlord Harry Cutter had tried to burn the previous week. Why wasn't he being held in jail? Then, like someone waking from a dream, I realized that there were no fire trucks there. Where were they? "Hey," I cried over the crackling of flames, "Hasn't anyone called 911?"

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Both pieces are factually accurate, but the literary nonfiction piece places the writer right in the scene, it expresses indignation ("Why wasn't he in jail?"), it contrasts the writer's initial reaction ("stunned into silence") with a sudden realization about the situation. The writer describes this with a **simile** ("like someone waking from a dream"). The style has become both more vivid and far more personal.

Each type of writing has its function. You read the newspaper essentially for facts; you read creative nonfiction with the hope you will be drawn into a new experience and share the writer's feelings as if they were your own.

## Contrasts with Reports and Scholarly Writing

The great majority of nonfiction writing takes the form of reports and scholarly writing. Every corporation, research lab, university, and government agency—indeed, all institutions—turn out warehouses of such writing. Most of these documents are incredibly dull for those not involved. They are written for those in a particular field. They determine corporate policy, record scientific findings, and shape the policies of government at every level. Their function is utilitarian. They are valuable, but they are neither literary nor creative.

It's not likely you'll ever see an economic report from the U.S. Bureau of the Budget that ends with a conclusion like this:

Although I am paid well to make economic predictions that sound assured, I sometimes feel a certain uneasiness. At the end of the day, relaxing in the quiet of my home, I wonder if I, like the Delphic Oracle, keep issuing these slightly ambiguous pronouncements without the slightest notion of what the future will hold.



And then there is academic research. It is often the most formal of all. There is still a tradition of never using the pronoun "I," even when presenting fervently felt convictions. It is also hampered by a growing trend toward specialized vocabularies devised by different critical schools. This limits the exchange of ideas and, more serious, tends to isolate critical theory from the general reading public.

Most writers of literary nonfiction prefer to reach a broader audience. As a result, their style tends to be more relaxed, sometimes closer to the spoken word. Personal feelings are not hidden behind barrier phrases like "And so the evidence appears to suggest that in many instances. . . ." The writer of literary nonfiction is free to write, "It's perfectly obvious that. . . ." There is real pleasure in expressing one's feelings directly and honestly and in sharing one's experience.

## Popular Misconceptions

Literary nonfiction includes many approaches, and we will examine some of them in the next chapter. But it is a mistake to assume that there are no limits. One of the most common misconceptions is that any journal entry can, without extensive revision, be called creative nonfiction.

This is not to downgrade **journals**. Every writer will benefit from keeping one. Some (especially poets) like to use a bound volume of lined paper that can be carried about easily. You can jot down with pen or pencil (remember those?) stray thoughts, topics, reactions to what you are reading. Others keep a special file on their computer, sometimes reserving a particular time to write, such as early morning or the last thing at night. Unlike diaries, journals don't simply review the events of the day. Their entries tend to be less organized than that. They include reactions to friends, the day's events, the news, and especially one's reading.

Both the pleasure and the value of journal entries stem from the fact that they are informal, often fragmentary, badly spelled, and disorganized. They are for writers what a sketch book is for a painter. The entries are raw material that may or may not lead to literary work.

If you are serious about writing, your private journal is just that, private. Pulling an entry out and submitting it to friends, a class, or a publisher as if it were finished work is an imposition. By asking others to evaluate it or make suggestions at that stage, you are really asking them to do your work.

Journal entries often become a good base for a creative nonfiction piece, but first they have to be given a focus, a structure, and carefully reviewed for style. And proofread. Always that. A good work of creative nonfiction requires the same careful revision one would put into a short story or poem.

A second misconception is that creative nonfiction is the same as an editorial. Argumentative pieces, whether a newspaper editorial, a partisan magazine article, or a political pamphlet or article, are persuasive essays. They are primarily designed to change the reader's opinions. With some exceptions,

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they stress persuasion in the same way that journalism places a heavy emphasis on facts. Both are utilitarian writing.

Editorials rarely make interesting use of language. And they are almost never personal in tone. They tend to be abstract in that they stress ideas or proposals. Such writing is enormously important because it shapes opinions, but only occasionally does it take the form of creative nonfiction.

As we will see, however, it is possible to express opinions, even strong convictions, in works that are truly literary nonfiction. Such works draw on all three of the criteria I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: they are based on actual events and people, not just abstract ideas; they are written with a heightened concern for language; and they are more personal than other types of nonfiction writing. We sense that there is a real person speaking to us, not just an editorial board or committee.

Finally, there is the misguided notion that there is no definable line between creative nonfiction and fiction based on fact. True, the border between the two can be foggy. It is easy to become uncertain with a piece that, say, focuses on actual historical characters but invents dialogue and thoughts. One can, however, differentiate the two by asking this: Is the writer's primary commitment to the people, places, and events described, or is his or her real intent to create a fictional work of art, using such material as a means to an end?

Authors are not always entirely honest about the nature of their own work, and reviewers frequently ignore these distinctions, but a conscientious reader can usually determine what type of writing it is.

A word of caution, however: Arguing about how to classify a published work can become tedious and unproductive. Far more important is the question of how you as a writer are going to approach a subject. "Loyalty" may seem like an odd word to use when describing an author's attitude toward a work in progress, but it is at the heart of nonfiction writing. When a writer feels an obligation to be true to actual people, events, and places while at the same time presenting his or own feelings honestly, the work will be literary nonfiction.

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