



The fine line between fact, fiction

Under pressure to create narrative drama, some nonfiction writers manipulate the truth and risk the reader's trust

THE BORDER BETWEEN fiction and nonfiction has grown increasingly vague. This is far better known to those who publish books than to those who buy them. I once heard a literary agent say she put novels and memoirs in the same category. Her real preference was for works of "narrative nonfiction." When used this way, the term "narrative" refers to a vague not-quite-true, not-quite-false genre of writing. In book publishing, it's generally accepted that works of narrative nonfiction will include as many fictional elements as are necessary to sustain reader interest. From that perspective, larger truths and narrative drive can best be achieved by relinquishing an outdated obsession with accuracy.

Tristine Rainer writes in *Your Life as Story*, a popular primer on memoir writing, that "New Autobiography, having moved into the literary arena of poetry and fiction, is now concerned with the larger truths of myth and story, which permit, and sometimes require, imaginative reshaping."

New Autobiography has many practitioners. Here are a few:

While signing copies of *Angela's Ashes* in his hometown of Limerick, Ireland, Frank McCourt was approached by a boyhood friend who wondered why McCourt had given him a sister he didn't have in the book. "This was true," McCourt responded. "Somehow or other I invented a sister for him who had none."

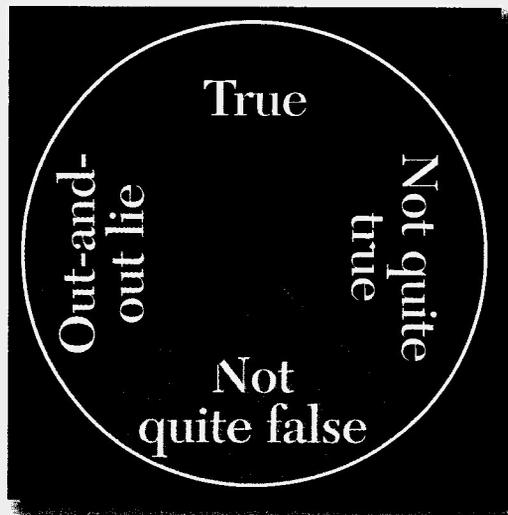
In his memoir *Widower's House*, John Bayley featured two women—an old family friend named Margot, "dark, ample and dynamic," and a young graduate student named Mella, "fair and slight"—who shared Bayley's grief and

bed after the death of his wife, Iris Murdoch. Bayley subsequently admitted that both women were figments of his imagination. "I had no lovers," he told a London *Sunday Times* reporter. "Just daydreams."

This is the post-truth credo: Creative manipulation and invention of facts can take us beyond the realm of mere accuracy into one of narrative truth.

Vivian Gornick's memoir, *Fierce Attachments*, is considered a classic. When it was published in 1987, *The New York Times* called *Fierce Attachments* a "fine and unflinchingly honest book." Gornick subsequently published a well-regarded guide to writing personal narratives. That was why, when the memoirist spoke at Goucher College a decade and a half after *Fierce Attachments* was published, listeners were startled to hear her admit that she'd invented parts of it. Not only that, Gornick added, some articles she'd written for the *Village Voice*

included composite characters. Gornick seemed surprised by the incredulity that greeted these admissions, not only among members of her audience but among those who read news accounts of this talk or heard it discussed by book critic Maureen Corrigan on NPR's *Fresh Air*. Corrigan, who teaches literature at Georgetown University, noted how much she liked Vivian Gornick's writing. The professor routinely assigned the author's books to her students. That was why she'd been so surprised by Gornick's admission of literary legerdemain. Corrigan said she still considered Gornick a fine writer and would continue to read her books, but now with her guard up.





Off the Cuff

New Journalism

IN THEORY, NEW Journalists such as Hunter Thompson and Gail Sheehy combined novelistic writing techniques with rigorous reporting to produce vivid works of nonfiction. Their debt to novel writing presumably was limited to devices such as scene setting, character development and foreshadowing.

The modern precedent for this approach can be found among midcentury *New Yorker* journalists such as Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross, and John Hersey, who wrote with fictionlike flair. Because their employer had such an impeccable reputation for verifying facts, this new writing method was taken as just that: a method, a style, not a challenge to veracity itself.

The New Yorker's four-part excerpt of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in 1965 was a watershed event in the history of so-called literary journalism. At the time it was serialized, then published as a book, Capote's depiction of a gruesome Kansas murder and its aftermath was lionized for combining novelistic panache with meticulous reporting. For decades to come, *In Cold Blood* set the standard for well-reported works of nonfiction written with dramatic flair. Even though it was filled with re-creations of scenes he hadn't witnessed, Capote called his book "immaculately factual." But since Capote died in 1984, a long list of *In Cold Blood's* embellished elements, including an altogether apocryphal ending, has been compiled.

The epitome of fantasy reported as fact was Nik Cohn's electrifying 13-page *New York* article about Brooklyn disco dancers that inspired the movie *Saturday Night Fever*. Cohn's 1976 cover story assured readers that its contents were 100 percent factual. Two decades later, Cohn confessed that he'd made the whole thing up. Even the assurance of factuality (which Cohn claimed *New York's* editors added without his knowledge) was jive. "There was no excuse for it," the writer admitted about his exercise in journalistic fabulism. "At the time, if cornered, I would doubtless have produced some high-flown waffle about alternative realities, tried to argue that writing didn't have to be true to be, at some level, real. But of course, I

would have been full of it. I knew the rules of magazine reporting, and I knew that I was breaking them. Bluntly put, I cheated."

Driven narratives

THE SUCCESS OF such imaginative journalism put pressure on all writers of nonfiction to follow suit. What's worse, their competition was not just the fictionalized work of colleagues but movies and television programs that put drama ahead of accuracy. Writers who tried to maintain standards of veracity were not playing on a level field with those who didn't.

In a newspaper's worst nightmare, 27-year-old Jayson Blair fabricated or plagiarized so much material in articles he wrote for *The New York Times* over four years' time that his employer was forced to publish a 14,000-word review of Blair's transgressions. This front-page article portrayed in painful detail how many times Blair had reported apocrypha as "facts," pretended to be places where he wasn't and borrowed material written by other reporters.

This problem was not the *Times'* alone. During a period of heightened vigilance following Blair's dismissal, many other newspapers fired reporters who had fabricated or plagiarized material. The most egregious case involved Jack Kelley, a star foreign correspondent at *USA Today* who had earned five Pulitzer Prize nominations. His gripping eyewitness account of a suicide bomber who blew up a Jerusalem pizza parlor nearly won that award. This story was one of many that *USA Today* subsequently determined was largely imaginary. The newspaper's investigation revealed that their reporter not only fabricated material in one story after another but, once challenged, wrote scripts for friends to follow when pretending to have been his sources.

During agonized postmortems of such episodes, editors and colleagues tried to figure out how these transgressions could have happened. Were they due to a star system that favored charismatic go-getters like Kelley and Blair? A lack of oversight on the part of overworked editors? Or was it a craving for "wow" journalism on the part of editors who suppressed warnings from others and doubts of their own to get great copy?

What seldom showed up in public consideration but did among journalists themselves was the pressure they felt to make their reporting not only accurate but dramatic—and with coherent story lines. On these terms they were not just to report the news but tell a great yarn in the same amount of time they used to spend just reporting the news. Reporters were supposed to be both Edward R. Murrow and Ernest Hemingway. Along the way, the reconstructed scene, the imagined conversation, the getting inside the head of your subject, migrated from the pages of books and magazines to those of daily newspapers.

Ripple effects

“SO WHAT?” SOME ask. Wouldn’t readers prefer a story made compelling through artifice to one that’s tediously factual? Wouldn’t you rather read a gripping embellished story than a boring accurate one? Where’s the harm?

Here’s the harm: When a piece of writing labeled “nonfiction” is made up, even in part, an implied contract between reader and writer has been broken. Their bond of trust begins to fray. “I felt let down,” biographer James Tobin said after learning that Capote had made up the ending of *In Cold Blood*. A price must be paid for literary fabulism.

Each such episode erodes the broader sense of credibility essential for a healthy literary climate. It isn’t just the fabricators who pay the price; it’s every writer who works in their wake.

Up to a point, any writer has permission to polish. We hardly expect a memoirist’s memory of dialogue, say, to be word perfect. If he or she takes minor liberties with chronology, most readers will understand. Do they expect authors of nonfiction to know for a certainty what’s true without a doubt? Obviously not. Those writers can only be expected to make a good faith effort to verify what they’re writing. But doing your best and getting an occasional fact wrong is not the same thing as deliberately inventing material without letting the reader know. Few enjoy reading a book that purports to be truthful, only to discover that it’s semi-truthful at best. Reading and liking work that’s labeled nonfiction, then discovering it was partly fiction, is like admiring someone you

meet, then finding out she isn’t altogether who she said she was. You may still admire that person, and that writer’s work, but now with your guard up.

Taking creative liberties such as cobbling together composite characters or re-creating dialogue is not a problem so long as readers are clear on the terms. The real issue is truth in packaging. Book buyers have a right to know what they’re buying.

Everyone knows that Philip Roth plays games by mingling facts with fiction. That’s part of this author’s appeal. But Roth’s not trying to fool anyone. He has enough integrity to call his blends of fact and fancy *novels*. So why don’t more writers follow Roth’s lead and call their fusion works fiction? For two reasons (at least). One has to do with the marketplace: On average, works of nonfiction sell better than those of fiction. The other is more intangible. Nonfiction writers who fictionalize, then wrap themselves in the mantle of “narrative truth” or “larger truth” or “emotional truth,” get to have it both ways. They enjoy the freedom to make things up while retaining the credibility that comes from calling their work nonfiction.

One might argue that it takes more skill to write a compelling work of nonfiction that sticks to facts as best the author can ascertain them. I have always told students and colleagues who are tempted to invent quotes (or “pipe” them, as it’s known in the trade) that they can’t possibly improve on things people will tell them if they make the effort to seek them out and listen to their stories. #

Ralph Keyes

The author of *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, *Timelock* and *The Courage to Write*, Ralph Keyes lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Excerpted from *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* by Ralph Keyes. Copyright © by the author and reprinted with permission. www.stmartins.com.

writermag.com

Is it OK to take liberties with the facts when writing memoir or autobiography? E-mail your comments to letters@writermag.com. A selection of letters will be published in an upcoming issue and on our Web site.