

APPROACHES TO CREATIVITY: Essays, Non-fiction, travel writing, New Journalism

One could say that now everybody who owns a computer – writes—whether it's a blog or a vlog or a report of an incident or Face Book entries. But even with the popularity of the bloggersphere – there is still a craft that needs to be nurtured under the banner of 'creative non-fiction'.

Page | 1

Non-fiction although it is multifarious by now is the broad term of writings that don't fall into the category of Novels, Plays and Poetry. And yet there are aspects of those techniques inherent in the good non-fiction writer.

Writing essays or journalistic pieces was once described as pure *jazz*—it has echoes of the old discipline of music but is also making it new: enigmatic, erratic, spontaneous, unpredictable, irreverent.

The unpredictable in writing non-fiction is one of its most alluring features. Joan Didion, who has written screenplays, essays, novels describes it as –' the act of saying I—of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying – listen to me, see it my way, change your mind'.

Change your mind can also be a quality of the non-fiction writer and Marilynne Robinson asserted that the great joy of writing non-fiction and personal essays in particular was being allowed to change one's mind. One may start with a premise and by the end of the exploration one has arrived at very different conclusions.

In the mid-sixties para journalism was banded about ' these people must be piping it, winging it, making up the dialogue—and immediately some people believed it to be a bastard form. The emphasis was on immediacy, on concrete reality as opposed to the literary. Novelists have always believed that they were the only 'creative' writers. They believed that they had insights into the human condition, the eternal mysteries, intellect, etc.

The New Journalism challenged all of that with writers such as Tom Wolfe and others – as they wrote scene by scene with little narrative, wrote realistic dialogue in order to define character, used sometimes third person point of view, and included gestures, habits, manners, customs, clothing, furniture all of these to create something new.

Non-fiction more than any other genre, in my mind, delves into and reveals the complexities of life and writing.

Simply put: creative non-fiction is:

- story and information
- style and substance
- frame and focus
- dialogue
- description
- detail
- inner point of view (which helps establish a link between reader and story)
- action too very often

Perhaps the most unpalatable word for a certain kind of reader is the word 'essay' as they will have all kinds of negative associations to that word – academic work, up all hours trying to finish some assignment. But what is an essay?

Essay—according to the dictionary is:

Short non-fiction prose piece,

- A short analytical, descriptive, interpretive piece of lit
- Or journalistic prose dealing with a particular topic,
- Especially from a personal and unsystematic viewpoint.

The word essay itself comes from the idea of test or trial or attempt to accomplish something

e.g shall we essay a walk on the promenade?

-To essay a theory

Essaier –to try – Old French from assumed Vulgar Latin exagiare-literally to weigh out

It's true to say that essays are multi-faceted: meandering, very often messy. It's an ambivalent form sometimes. As to what it should be - the only salient fact about what should be that it is engaging, that it gets the reader hooked, that it nails the reader, needles them into taking it seriously.

The Essay

The essay can be a mixture of many forms, it can be prosaic, poetic, dramatic but it does have a strong personal voice. Non-fiction compositions usually explore a **single** theme or topic and yet they can take up **multiple** subjects.

Very often the theme or topic is there in order to allow the writer to explore other paths or avenues ... the subject is very often an excuse in order to raise or comment on other subjects.

Most essays are relatively brief. But they may range from less than a page to a novel's length. They are generally written in prose, but a few have been composed in verse e.g Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* in 1711 and *An Essay on Man* in 1733.

The form developed in classical times, but the term itself derives from the French *essai* – meaning attempt - first applied by the French writer Michel de Montaigne to his 1580 collection of informal compositions.

Montaigne's use of the term *essai* was meant to reflect the uncertain and inquiring quality of his ruminations. In 1597, a term entered English when Francis Bacon applied it to his famous work *Essays* 1597- 1625. The etymology of the term reminds us that essayists make no claim to an

exhaustive and technical examination of a subject; rather they seek to record their thoughts on the topic at hand for a general public.

Essays are often classified as

- Argumentative
- Descriptive
- Expository
- Or narrative

It is difficult though to see these as separate entities and there will be a lot of overlapping.

They can also be categorised as

- Informal
- Formal

Authors of formal essays conduct a comparatively impersonal and analytical examination of their subject matter. Formal essays are often longer than informal ones, more dignified or solemn in tone, they are designed to declaim or instruct rather than to entertain. Writers of informal essays tend to adopt a tone that is lighter, more personal and conversational, and more humorous than that which is adopted by their more formal counterparts. Informal essayists also tend to incorporate anecdotes and aphorisms

Until 18th century, essays published as collections in books. The development of the periodical in the early 18th century made essay writing a more prevalent and popular form. It also had a standardising effect – in the informal essay especially - elevating the role of humour and restricting maximum length. In the 19th century, essays found in periodicals and magazines and the proliferation of these – whether literary or popular - kept the essay in the forefront of literary genres.

The personal essay, the informal essay emerged with the continued development of the 19th century periodical – some famous essayist were Charles Lamb, Thomas de Quincey and William Hazlitt.

Personal essays almost run over into the memoir at times, or the autobiographical – the content is often urbane and intimate in manner.

This at the penultimate session – whereby you've been exposed/inspired I hope to write in various genres is also a good time to rethink about '**Why we write**' and there is no better writer to look at who question than by looking at—George Orwell in 'Why I write' :

1. Sheer egotism—we want to distinguish ourselves through words, to be admired, respected perhaps during our lifetime and if we're lucky – through eternity too
2. Aesthetic enthusiasm – we write to share with readers what we think of as worth telling/ thinking / showing... and want to communicate our enjoyment of words and 'their right order'; the sound of words/ rhythm of a good story
3. Historical impulse—we write to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity
4. Political purpose- we write to push the world in a certain direction, to alter people's idea of the kind of society we should strive after.

George Orwell, *Essays*, Penguin, 1984—a marvellous collection of essays from the profound and moving 'The Hanging' and 'Shooting an Elephant' to lighter essays 'Books v Cigarettes' or 'Good Bad Books'.

Joan Didion, in 'Why I write' inspired by Orwell summarizes his message- to repeat what I previously said:

In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying 'listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.'

Both Orwell and Didion assume that we write for an audience, whether in modes as utilitarian as letters, memos, reports or as imaginative fiction and poetry. That's also the main motive behind 'blogging' – yes, we write for ourselves first but for some other too, as every writing and writer needs an audience to remain alert and alive. (Gertrude Stein said that I write for myself and strangers', Mary Oliver said something similar when she said that she writes to a stranger a hundred years or more in the future who might read her.)

Fact and fiction: Writing non-fiction makes a fundamental assumption—or a principle that people have been led to believe and that is to tell the truth. But as Emily Dickinson said 'tell the truth but tell it slant' and that's exactly what happens in non-fiction. Like telling the truth or any portion of it implies selecting, creating a structure, shaping it to fit the teller's story; omitting facts, embellishing other components.—as human beings we don't know any other way. That's why the Levenson inquiry was so fascinating because it questions the fundamental notion of 'truth' and how it's received, gathered, noted, and delivered to an audience.

There are certain principles which help in the writing of non-fiction:

VOICE: Voice will emerge in the writing whether it's intended or not—your attitude towards the subject will reflect voice: vocabulary, sentence structure, the way details are selected. And the I is pronounced as we get in various columnists' content. (the impersonal is more formal—we/)

William Safire talks about another sense of voice/ 'On Language' – in the New York Times:

The distinctive mode of expression, expected quirks and characteristic attitude of writer towards subject ...

tone: conveys mood and emotional temper, which can vary.. argumentative, playful

authority: NEED FOR ORIGINALITY IS A WAY OF ASSERTING AUTHORITY

WRITE ON A COMPELLING SUBJECT

SET THE SCENE

It's all in the end dependent on 'context'

Some believe that we should write creative non-fiction before we attempt more imaginative writing – but here's the problem—sometimes even imaginative writing is also non-fiction—where is 'truth' and to what extent is what we write 'the truth'.

So what kind of materials do we mean by non-fiction:

Diaries,
Journals
Letters
Autobiographies
Articles
Blogging
Essays: nature/ ecopoetic.

This is a huge subject and worthy of a whole session on how to write about the natural world. We will cover this subject under 'Sense of Place' next semester and look at ways of writing 'place' and nature. We might even go for a walk adopting Richard Long's techniques: see William Malpas, *The Art of Richard Long*, Crescent Moon Publishing.

Books on Memoir/Biography but also Essays

Blake Morrison, *And when did you last see your father*, Picador, 1996

Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, Norton, 1982

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*, Harper Collins, 1994

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, Penguin, 1990

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*, Bloomsbury, 2004

Raymond Carver, *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Collins Harvill, 1989

Richard Hoggart, *First & Last Things*, Aurum, 1999

Page | 6 Kathleen Jamie, *Findings*, Sort of Books, 2005

Maya Angelou, *I know why the caged bird sings*, N York, Random, 1970

Czeslaw Milosz, *Unattainable Earth*, Ecco, 1986

Casanova (1725- 1798), *Memoirs* (free web book to read)

Nigel Slater, *Toast*, Harper, 2003

Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*,

Read: [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3612355/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3612355/Writers-life-Tobias-Wolff.html) Writers-life-Tobias-Wolff.html

Biography

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 1976, New York
Vintage 1989

Donaldson Scott, *By Force of Will: The Life and art of Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Viking, 1977

Hilary Spurling, *Matisse, The Master*, Hamilton, 1998

(you may want to look at her many books on the biographies of artists)

Owen Sheers, *Dust Diaries*, Faber, 2004

(part biog/part novel/part travel)

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2006

(part memoir/part biog of husband and daughter),

For those of you who missed the session, there are handouts available of various texts we looked at and also an article by Zadie Smith on writing non-fiction.