

An Ignorant and Informed Readership: The Contradictions of Creative Nonfiction

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Creative nonfiction is a genre replete with contradictions—the name itself shows that: nonfiction writing is true and factual, but creative writing is imaginative and inventive. Because of fundamental contradictions like this, there is no standardized or even most common definition of the genre. This creates confusion for both critics and ordinary readers and has led many writers to develop their own understandings of what creative nonfiction is and isn't. This thesis examines three primary case studies in an effort to assess how these writers understand creative nonfiction: first, the 2003 backlash against Vivian Gornick following an address at Goucher College; second, Lauren Slater's 2000 metaphorical memoir *Lying*; and third, John D'Agata's efforts to push back against growing dogmatism in creative nonfiction through his 2010 *About a Mountain* and 2012 *Lifespan of a Fact*. This thesis also analyzes the reader response to those works to gauge their success and explores the trust relationship between writer and reader in order to better understand the current atmosphere in

creative nonfiction and the process through which this uncompromising mentality developed.

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An Ignorant and Informed Readership: The Contradictions of Creative Nonfiction

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Lani Rush, Author

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## Introduction: A Problematic Genre

In the fifty months it spent as the *Times* bestseller for nonfiction, Greg Mortenson's 2006 *Three Cups of Tea* became a must-read sensation. Friends passed their copies on to more friends, book clubs selected the heartwarming story for their discussions, and for a time, even the US military made the book required reading for soldiers serving in the Middle East (Jaffe). *Three Cups of Tea* tells Mortenson's tale of getting lost in the Pakistani wilderness, his rescue by impoverished villagers, and the fulfilling of his promise to return and build a school for the children of the village. It was advertised as the "astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his humanitarian campaign to use education to combat terrorism in the Taliban's backyard" (Mortenson) and was heralded by critics as inspirational and heroic (Spiedel). For almost five years, *Three Cups of Tea* won readers over as it touched their hearts and filled them with hope—until a counterpoint, *Three Cups of Deceit*, was released.

Written by John Krakauer, author of *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*, who had originally been a supporter of Mortenson's book and associated non-profit organization Central Asia Institute (CAI), the 89-page 2011 e-book catalogues the inaccuracies of Mortenson's memoir and exposes the mishandling of his charity's funds. Krakauer's investigation showed that Mortenson's story of being kidnapped by the Taliban as a consequence of his efforts to educate village children was wildly inaccurate, since he had actually been a respected guest of Pakistani citizens who had no ties to the Taliban (Krakauer). Critics and readers were appalled to find that they had been taken in by Mortenson's book and even more disgusted by what they learned about the mismanagement of donations that were made as a direct result of the memoir—a journalist friend of Mortenson's even admitted in the *New York Times* that he was "deeply troubled that only 41 percent of the money raised in 2009 went to build schools" (Kristof).

Mortenson was denounced as a liar, a cheat, and a disgrace. A lawsuit was pursued and Random House, Mortenson's publisher, settled by agreeing to pay \$2.35 million in refunds to readers (Daly). For many readers, the investigation extinguished the appeal and inspiration of *Three Cups of Tea*. However, the book continued to sell, though the rate slowed dramatically. The book dropped out of the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, though it ultimately spent well 220 weeks on the list at lower rankings (*New York Times*). This was partially due to interest in the scandal, partially to the readers who insisted the book still held value if separated from the author and viewed as fiction, and also partially to the small segment of critics who suggested that *Three Cups of Tea* still qualified as a work of creative nonfiction—like *Salon* co-founder and book critic Laura Miller, who wrote in 2011:

*Three Cups of Tea* belongs to that category of inspirational nonfiction in which feel-good parables take precedence over strict truthfulness. Its object is to present a reassuring picture of the world as a place where all people are fundamentally the same underneath their cultural differences, where ordinary, well-meaning Americans can “make a difference”... Heartwarming anecdotes come with the territory and as with the happily-ever-after endings of romantic comedies, everyone tacitly agrees not to examine them too closely... What *Three Cups of Tea* provides is... a feeling of comradely motivation and a symbol of plucky American virtue in the person of Greg Mortenson. If he has to massage some facts into a better story in order to create sentimental enthusiasm for his cause, many of his fans are more than willing to give him that. Pointing out that a couple of these stories aren't true strikes them as self-serving nitpicking and pettifoggery that, above all, misses the big picture. (Miller)

Miller argues here that creative nonfiction gives Mortenson the freedom to massage some facts in order to accomplish his overall goal and convey the larger message, and other authors and critics throughout this thesis will take a similar stance about the freedoms of creative nonfiction, if not about the Mortenson issue itself. The chasm between Miller's view of Mortenson and that of the opposing critics<sup>1</sup> is less the result of differing opinions on the

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<sup>1</sup> See John Krakauer's 2013 "Is It Time to Forgive Greg Mortenson?" in *The Daily Beast* and Peter Hessler's 2011 "What Mortenson Got Wrong" in *The New Yorker*

importance of honesty and more the result of very different understandings of what creative nonfiction is. These different perspectives on what constitutes and governs creative nonfiction are the foundation of this thesis, and I will argue that writers can and should teach their readers to have the same fundamental understanding of creative nonfiction.

Creative nonfiction, despite only coming onto the literary scene by that name in the last fifty years, is not at all a new idea. This type of writing has been published under different labels, such as New Journalism and literary journalism, for decades. In his 1973 manifesto entitled *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe explained that the New Journalism “consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose. And all the while, quite beyond matters of technique, it enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened” (Wolfe). Wolfe contended that these features constituted an entirely new and unprecedented genre of writing, but he was contradicted by critics like Robert Boynton, who described the New Journalism as another stage in the development of American Journalism, a genre that would continue to morph as it developed over time (Boynton). In this thesis, I will push harder on Boynton’s position and suggest that American journalism has morphed so much that it has, in fact, split into two now separately evolving genres: journalism, which attempts to convey fact or opinion to the reader without using the tools of fiction and creative nonfiction, and creative nonfiction, which uses whichever tools the writer deems necessary to communicate a true story. Wolfe’s New Journalism fits into this definition of creative nonfiction, but the genre still has room for much more.

In many ways, like the New Journalism, writing that now falls under the creative nonfiction moniker is doing the same thing that historians and writers have been doing for

centuries—telling a true and interesting story about their lives or the world around them. Lee Gutkind, who founded the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction* in 1993 and whom *Vanity Fair* described as “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction” (“Lee Gutkind: Editor”), explains the genre’s name this way:

The words “creative” and “nonfiction” describe the form. The word “creative” refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. (Gutkind)

Essentially, creative nonfiction is telling the truth and telling it artfully—and this is nothing new. The term is simply the latest incarnation of a longstanding storytelling tradition, and what makes this version different from its predecessors is its reception. True and interesting stories, when told as creative nonfiction, have recently been accepted—or perhaps, as this thesis will show, are beginning to be accepted—as a form of writing with the potential for the artistic expression of *truth*, as literature. This recognition has proven to be both positive and negative for these true and interesting stories, as the last hundred years, and especially the last thirty, have seen an explosion of writing that can now be called creative nonfiction, though their goals, motivations, and depictions of “truth” vary widely to say the least.

Gutkind continues,

“In some ways, creative nonfiction is like jazz—it’s a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques, some of which are newly invented and others as old as writing itself. Creative nonfiction can be an essay, a journal article, a research paper, a memoir, or a poem; it can be personal or not, or it can be all of these.” (Gutkind)

This explains the sudden growth of creative nonfiction: writing that previously was given a label, such as the journal article and research paper mentioned above, but not a genre, such as fiction or poetry, is now recognized as creative nonfiction. Works as varied as Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (an essay), James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (a blend of

autobiography and documentary), and John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (travelogue) are now placed under the same umbrella as David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (personal essay collection) because they have a common goal: to tell a true and interesting story.

Defining creative nonfiction as “true stories, well told” (as per the motto for *Creative Nonfiction*) has helped to contextualize creative nonfiction as a global tradition that dates back, according to one scholar, to 1500 B.C.E<sup>2</sup>, which has led to creative nonfiction's categorization as literature, suggesting an artistic legitimacy the genre mostly hadn't known before. However, proposing that creative nonfiction be included in the literary world also subjects creative nonfiction to criticism and debate that it never faced when known by another name. This criticism demands that genre-defining rules be set so that all creative nonfiction writing can be categorized appropriately and held to the same standards—standards that speak of reliability, morality, and fairness. But here is the first and most consequential problem in creative nonfiction: no one seems to know what the rules ought to be.

How important is truth in creative nonfiction? How true does a story need to be in order to count as creative nonfiction? Do the facts of the story need to be verifiable? Can the writer's memory be trusted? How much freedom does the writer have with the facts? Does creative license apply here, since the genre is labeled as “creative”? Or does the “nonfiction” label cancel out creativity?

These questions and many more have made creative nonfiction the cause of much controversy within literary circles—for example, at the recent 2013 AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) conference, a heated debate arose at the “Why Genre Matters” panel presentation over the parameters of the creative nonfiction genre (“Conference Archives”).

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<sup>2</sup> See John D'Agata's *Lost Origins of the Essay*

Many more facets of the same debate have played out in print magazines and journals like Lee Gutkind's *Creative Nonfiction* and *Brevity* as well as online in professional and personal blogs and discussion boards<sup>3</sup>. Readers question writers' honesty, critics<sup>4</sup> disapprove of liberties taken with language and storytelling, and writers themselves offer their own opinions on how creative nonfiction should be bound<sup>5</sup>. A discussion of this genre almost always begins with a tangle of interwoven theories, conflicting moral codes, and extreme examples of both absolute fidelity to the factual truth and radical deviation from it.

This thesis will look at examples of friction between writers and readers to gain a better understanding of their relationship when they write and read under the banner of this genre, and try to prove that said relationship is changing. I will mainly use three case studies—Vivian Gornick, Lauren Slater, and John D'Agata—to suggest answers three primary questions—What practices are acceptable in creative nonfiction? What responsibilities does a writer have when publishing work labeled creative nonfiction? What role do readers play in the process of making meaning and holding authors accountable to a somewhat nebulous set of standards?

There isn't yet an established or agreed upon set of rules for creative nonfiction as a genre, and I will not attempt to define or create any in this thesis. Instead, I will look at the personal ethics that guide individual writers' creative choices in order to profile the issues at stake and the facets of the last decade of debate. I will assess Gornick's, Slater's, and D'Agata's successes based on the critical and popular response to their work in an attempt to narrow the range of questions surrounding the genre and, ultimately, to gain a better understanding of how

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<sup>3</sup> See *Brevity's* nonfiction blog, Gawker.com, as well as user reviews on Amazon.com and Goodreads.com

<sup>4</sup> See Maureen Corrigan, Janet Maslin, Charles Bock

<sup>5</sup> See Kathryn Harrison, David Lazar, Mark Doty, John D'Agata especially

creative nonfiction functions. The ways in which audience response affects the general identification of the genre will also be a critical issue.

First, I will look at the 2003 backlash against memoirist Vivian Gornick in order to explore and reconcile Gornick's seemingly contradictory prescription for the ideal reader of creative nonfiction—a reader who is both “informed” and “willfully ignorant”. Next, I will jump back in time to examine a 2000 book by Lauren Slater, *Lying*, in order to study the difference between the audience reception of Slater's and Gornick's works and postulate a shift in literary movements marked by an increasing interest in and demand for facts. Finally, I will turn forward to John D'Agata's 2010 *About a Mountain* and 2012 *Lifespan of a Fact* to discuss the ways in which D'Agata has spent the past half-decade trying to move the genre in a new direction.

Throughout this thesis, I will keep this guideline from Lee Gutkind in mind, and would encourage the reader of this thesis to as well:

“‘Creative’ doesn't mean inventing what didn't happen, reporting and describing what wasn't there. It doesn't mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear—and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader—the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative nonfiction: ‘You can't make this stuff up!’”

Or can you?

## Chapter One: Vivian Gornick and the Contradictory Ideal Reader

In the early 2000s, a flurry of literary scandals erupted from which perhaps no genre of fact-based writing was safe. In historical writing, Doris Kearns Goodwin faces plagiarism accusations for *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (Crader); in journalism, Jayson Blair stood accused of fraud at the *New York Times* (New York Times); and in magazine writing, Stephen Glass was found to have fabricated sources (Lueng). In 2003, amid this flurry of distrust and disgrace, writer Vivian Gornick also found herself at the center of a controversy that implicated the fact-related genre of creative nonfiction.

On July 28, 2003, Vivian Gornick addressed a group of creative writing MFA students at Goucher College in Baltimore. The students were attending a two-week seminar as they pursued MFA degrees in creative nonfiction, and the college had invited Gornick to speak on creative nonfiction and specifically on memoir as her specialty—a well-earned designation, considering her background and accomplishments. Gornick's first memoir, *Fierce Attachments*, was published 16 years prior in 1987, right at the beginning of a surge of popularity for memoirs. The book quickly became very popular and received praise from readers and critics alike—a review in the *New York Times* called it “a fine, unflinchingly honest book” (Simpson).

The memoir explores Gornick's tumultuous relationship with her mother throughout childhood and into adulthood, and the honesty mentioned by the *Times*' reviewer perhaps refers to the fairness with which Gornick examines the ways she and her mother hurt each other, hate each other, and nonetheless share a profound bond—a fierce attachment—to each other. In the memoir, Gornick plays her childhood experiences in a Bronx tenement against scenes of walking the streets of Brooklyn with her mother as an adult, thus creating a temporal back-and-forth

narrative that engages the reader from multiple perspectives and time periods. Having only previously written in academia and journalism, Gornick's memoir was her first work of creative nonfiction and soon catapulted her to the forefront of the field. Some even called her the “grande dame of memoir and personal narrative” (qtd. in Sterling). When she stood in front of the students at Goucher more than a decade after her publication date, Gornick had written seven books, including a work of craft theory on the art of personal narrative called *The Situation and the Story*, and she had taught creative nonfiction at several universities. These credentials made her a respected and trustworthy authority to her audience at Goucher. Here was a writer who knew both how to write well and also how to discuss the practice of writing well. Who better to teach graduate-level writers how to create nonfiction?

After speaking for an hour on the craft of creative nonfiction and counseling students on turning their raw experiences into readable and meaningful stories, Gornick read excerpts from *Fierce Attachments* and then took questions from the audience, which had been kept small (only about 50 students and staff) to facilitate a challenging discussion. In the course of answering one student's question, Gornick explained that some scenes and events in *Fierce Attachments* had not happened exactly as described on the page. She said she had made composites out of the elements of several real conversations and scenes for the sake of narrative development, and she acknowledged that the sequence of events in the book was not necessarily the order that those events had occurred in her life.

The students in attendance, however, had been taught a much stricter definition of creative nonfiction by their professors—a definition in which creative nonfiction had to meet journalistic standards of truth, which were privileged over literary standards of story. They immediately mistrusted Gornick's composition process. One student asked how Gornick “would

feel if the tables had been turned, if Gornick's mother had invented stories about her daughter and had written about them as though they were true" (qtd. in Sterling). Gornick answered that "the question... was 'unanswerable'" (ibid). The students' questioning became increasingly intense and pointed, leaving Gornick bewildered. When she defended herself in an article in *Salon* weeks later, she said that her intention for the lecture was to:

"define the genre as I understand it, practice it, and teach it. I was at pains during this talk to make a definite distinction between what the writer of personal narrative does, and what the writer of biography, newspaper writing, or literary journalism does." ("A Memoirist Defends")

Despite her intentions for her lecture at Goucher, the talk ignited a controversial conversation among readers and critics about the ethics of creative nonfiction. Questions about the exact position of creative nonfiction within the literary world became a topic of debate in classrooms and on the pages of literary journals like *Brevity* and *Grist*: Just how "nonfictional" is creative nonfiction? What are the standards and ethics that shape the genre? And where is the line between generous creativity and unhelpful deception?

### **Initial Critical Response to Goucher Lecture**

Four days after Gornick's appearance at Goucher, Terry Greene Sterling, one of the students in attendance, published an article in *Salon* entitled "Confessions of a Memoirist: Acclaimed writer Vivian Gornick admits to fudging the facts to a roomful of journalists. Did she use creative license—or betray her readers?" Sterling gives an account of the evening at Goucher, and then she summarizes her own and the other students' reactions to Gornick's story. She writes:

When I spoke with Gornick by phone a few days after the seminar, she denied saying that she had ever 'made up' anything in her memoir, although certain 'conversations and circumstances are composed.' She believes with all her heart that her memoir is honest. (Sterling)

Unsatisfied with Gornick’s defense, Sterling calls Gornick’s justifications weak and evasive, and she implies that there is little difference between composing and inventing—a difference that, however large or small, would become central to the debate over Gornick’s actions and the craft of creative nonfiction in general.

The text of *Fierce Attachments* offers many examples of this composing process and allows for a deeper exploration of Gornick’s view of what “composing” entails. When she later explained her view of the incident at Goucher in *Salon*, Gornick said:

I mentioned that on a few occasions in the book I had made a composite out of the elements of two or more incidents—none of which had been fabricated—for the purpose of moving the narrative forward. I might also have added that I played loose with time, for the very same reasons, relating incidents that were chronologically out of order, for the sake of narrative development. (“A memoirist defends”)

Gornick plays with the narrative this way in the recurring scenes in which she walks around the city with her mother as an adult. In the book’s childhood narrative, the reader is able to understand the foundation of the complex relationship these two women share, and in the descriptions of the city walks, the reader sees the childhood tension come to maturity as mother and daughter clash. This dual structure not only drives the story forward: the story depends on it—Gornick even said in one interview that getting the idea to use the city walks “was a gift from the gods. Discovering it gave me the structure, and gave me the book” (Farber). The walking scenes through the city also gave Gornick distance from the emotional experience and allowed her to write the story in a relatable way for the reader—in other words, these sections were important for both the writer’s production of the story and the reader’s understanding of it. In an interview with *Fourth Genre* in 2005, Gornick discussed some of the choices that she made in the “walking” narrative:

It wasn't difficult to arrive at the realization that each of the walks had to be freestanding. They each had to arrive at some point, some epiphany, some piece of recognition. And on these walks, I was going to give my mother all of her wisdom. I was going to give her the good lines. She was going to be wise, warm, funny: all of those things she could be, so that I could look back with relief, and show the neurotic, overwhelming, dominating, self-pitying creature that she was. Giving my mother the good stuff on our walks was also a way for me to gain enough distance, so that I didn't aggrandize myself at her expense. It made me realize that she wasn't going to be trashed, and that I wasn't going to be trashed. This helped me draw back far enough so that I could see the picture whole, and serve the fierce attachment, rather than either of us. (Farber 136)

These are the changes Gornick referenced at Goucher College, but added to these changes here is the explanation that she composed dialogue with the intention of amplifying the aspects of her mother's character not available from Gornick's her younger and more vulnerable narrative perspective. The walks allow the reader to see an important and balancing aspect of her mother as "wise, warm, funny." Further, the changes in this example have fairly low stakes, since the events of the story are not fabricated but merely moved around—in Gornick's vocabulary, they are not *invented* but *composed*. These changes were nonetheless deliberate. It isn't difficult to understand how taking such liberties helped produce a more understandable narrative for the reader, but this justification does little to answer questions about the ethicality of altering facts—in fact, it raises more questions. When is it acceptable to manipulate facts for the sake of the narrative? How much manipulation is allowed in "composing" and when does that manipulation become "inventing"? It's worth noting that these changes were made at the hands of a generous, skilled writer, and this same flexibility could allow a less generous and skilled writer to take the kind of liberties with the truth that can hurt readers. Thus, it is possible that the Goucher students were reacting as much to this possibility as they were to Gornick's specific changes.

Terry Greene Sterling asked these same questions in the days following Gornick's Goucher lecture. She and her classmates were perplexed by the mixed messages they were getting from their MFA professors and the visiting authority whose work they respected and admired. She writes in *Salon* of the question and answer period:

It was surely a culture clash: a sophisticated New York memoirist facing off against a crowd that included highly regarded journalists. But it left some students scratching their heads afterward, trying to understand when fabricated information is acceptable in nonfiction—and when does it make you [disgraced journalist] Jayson Blair?

During the questioning, I glanced over at Patsy Sims, the director of the Goucher program, a former newspaper reporter who has authored four nonfiction books. Sims looked miserable. She would later tell me: “I was stunned. I had no idea Gornick had taken these liberties ... I had 43 students with whom we try to instill the importance of not making things up ... (Sterling)

Sterling's description of Sims's accomplishments holds an important clue to understanding both the conflict that arose at Goucher and the larger controversy surrounding creative nonfiction's definition as a genre. Sterling describes Sims as a “former newspaper reporter who has authored four nonfiction books” (“Confession of a Memoirist”). Sims was first a journalist and second a nonfiction writer—and not necessarily a *creative* nonfiction writer. Here we can see the fundamental difference between Gornick and the professors at Goucher, as well as the primary opposing sides in the larger controversy. Sims' and the Goucher professors' understanding of memoir was informed by the journalistic objective of relaying a truthful, factual account, while Gornick's understanding of memoir was informed by creative nonfiction's objective of telling readers an emotionally meaningful and true story, which contains provisions for the complexity of what we might call emotional truth. For the former journalists at Goucher, truth was singular—complex, perhaps, but singular and perhaps even one-dimensional. In simplified terms Gornick and other memoirists who will be discussed in the following chapters

promote creative as a genre that stands apart from journalism and that tells the truth as it happened and also as it was felt.

The key difference between the Goucher professors' thinking and Vivian Gornick's is here: Gornick places creative nonfiction away from journalism's truth and under the umbrella of literature, where it is given the same creative license other literary works are granted, especially the complexity to contain multiple kinds of truth—truths that can exist from multiple perspectives or at different times in a writer's life. These multiple kinds of truth are not mutually exclusive; they coexist and inform one another even though they arise from different interpretations of the same events.

### **Emotional Truth vs. Experiential Truth**

In her guide to the art of personal narrative, *The Situation and the Story* (ironically, the same book she had been invited to Goucher to speak on), Gornick explains that there is more than one kind of truth in creative nonfiction: "Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (*The Situation and the Story* 13). We might also call these two versions of the truth experiential and emotional—The experiential truth is the nuts and bolts of the story: how it happened, when it happened, who was there, who said what. This is the factual truth, perhaps even the journalistic truth, because journalism's main goal is to convey facts to readers. The emotional truth, on the other hand, is the heart of the story—it depends upon the experiential truth to move it forward, but it emphasizes the *why* over the *how*. The emotional truth explains why this story is worth reading, why it has survived in the writer's memory and why the reader should care about it. For

example, in the walking segments of *Fierce Attachments*, we can see the great tension that has developed between mother and daughter over time and connect emotionally to the characters' struggle to love one another while maintaining separate identities. We also see Gornick "giving" her mother the funny lines, thus showing the range of emotions her mother is capable of and painting her as a more complex person than Gornick could have appreciated as a child. In this emotional truth, we see the literary, but not necessarily literal, truth of the story. Whichever labels these versions of the truth are given—situation vs. story, experiential vs. emotional, literal vs. literary—Gornick explains that creative nonfiction should value emotion more than facts. Or we might say that, in Gornick's brand of creative nonfiction, the feelings *are* the facts.

Gornick wrote of *Fierce Attachments*, "If the book has any strength at all, it is because I remained scrupulously faithful to the story, not the situation" ("Truth in Personal Narrative" 7). Following the thread of emotional truth, even at the expense of the facts, seems to be her personal ethical code for creative nonfiction, and evidently one she would have more people adopt.

Sterling reports that when asked if Gornick had somehow warned her readers of the changes she had made—in a preface or an author's note, for example—Gornick replied she had not. More importantly, she said she had *deliberately avoided* informing her readers of any difference between her memoir and her real life, because her readers should be "willfully ignorant" (qtd. in Sterling). This strongly implies that for Gornick, ignorance is essential to the task of reading, in that it allows readers to participate in freely making meaning and moving through the text unencumbered.

But what exactly is willful ignorance? What elements of a book must readers ignorant of? The two ideas seem impossible to reconcile—how can a reader choose to be ignorant unless he knows specifically what requires said ignorance?

To further complicate this concept of willful ignorance, Gornick also writes that the backlash against her is “proof... that memoir writing is a genre still in need of an informed readership” (“A memoirist defends”). Here we have a reference to the exact opposite of ignorance, also tied to the act of reading. So what does it mean to be an informed reader? What is the process of becoming informed? And how can one be informed and ignorant simultaneously?

Taken individually, Gornick’s two qualifications for readers are somewhat vague and engender their own rich lines of questioning, but taken together, they seem to contradict one another and generate more questions than answers. The question of how a reader is both informed and willfully uninformed becomes cyclical and the two terms overlap, answering one another with still more questions. By prescribing these characteristics, Gornick has pointed out a path to the heart of creative nonfiction. Exploring, defining, and ultimately reconciling information and ignorance will lead to a greater understanding of creative nonfiction and its unstable position in literature.

These questions can be answered—or *begin* to be answered--by studying the backlash against Gornick and then moving on to examine other controversies, misunderstandings, and scandals in creative nonfiction. This work can help discover how this dichotomy between information and ignorance functions in those examples. Additional questions will then need to be asked before answers begin to emerge. For example, is an informed and ignorant reader ideal for every creative nonfiction writer? Do all writers define ignorance and information the same way?

And finally, how does being informed and ignorant help to answer the question that looms over this genre in its entirety: How true is the truth in creative nonfiction?

## Chapter Two: Defining and Reconciling Ignorance and Information

We can begin by investigating readers themselves to determine how their level of information influences their reception of a work of creative nonfiction. Analyzing the critical and popular reader responses to Gornick's memoir and to her Goucher lecture may provide a definition to these seemingly incompatible attributes and explain how they can be reconciled.

### Critical Responses to Gornick's Goucher Lecture

After Gornick's lecture at Goucher College, "Truth", "trust", and "honesty" became buzzwords in literary discussion nearly overnight, since Terry Greene Sterling's *Salon* article was published just four days after the now infamous lecture on July 28. These buzzwords came from critics and those in the literary field, and their experience and education makes their response of particular interest in the search for a definition of "informed." Of all potential readers, the profession of literary critics seems to define them as informed, and thus, branding their ignorance is somewhat striking.

Sterling frames her response as the concerns of a confused Goucher student, but there is a surprising emotional undercurrent evident in her syntax. Sterling avoids a full-frontal attack on Gornick's ethics by focusing on the general discussion of "truth vs. creative license", but her feelings are revealed by the language that she uses to describe Gornick's lecture. For example, Sterling writes, "Her revelations...describing the liberties she'd taken with the truth...shocked her listeners" ("Confessions of a Memoirist"). The words "revelations" subtly shows Sterling's bias in the debate—after all, Gornick likely didn't see her lecture as a "revelation." That term carries a connotation of bringing unknown, usually secret, knowledge to light, but Gornick later

explained that she had said nothing new during her Goucher lecture and expressed wonder at the response: “To my amazement, these words were taken as a ‘confession’ on my part...” (“A memoirist defends”). This language changes what might have been a conversation into a controversy. Sterling continues, “Gornick admitted she had ‘composed’ some of the walks and conversations with her mother in the memoir” (“Confessions of a Memoirist”). To use the word “admitted”, another synonym for “confessed,” suggests that Gornick resisted giving the information, as if she attempted to keep the audience unaware as an act of self-protection or personal control at the expense of others. The language that Sterling uses to describe Gornick’s lecture conveys her own confusion about the debacle, as one might expect, but it also reveals a surprisingly emotional reaction to the discovery that Sterling, as a reader, was made ignorant to certain changes and was not informed enough about the genre to see Gornick’s choices as acceptable, so she feels betrayed by the both the deceitful truth itself and the attempt to hide it.

Sterling also uses the word “invented” to describe a scene, but Gornick herself is very careful to note, “I [am] a memoirist who composed (composed, mind you, not invented) a narrative drawn entirely from the materials of my own experience...” (“A memoirist defends”). As Gornick explains it in *The Situation and the Story*, composing requires working with entirely factual events—the situation, or the experiential truth—and creating something new and expressive with them—the story, or the emotional truth. She gives an example in which she was struck deeply by a eulogy given at a funeral for a doctor she knew:

It had been composed. That is what had made the difference. The eulogist had been remembering herself as a young doctor coming under the formative influence of the older one. The memory had acted as an organizing principle that determined the structure of her remarks. Structure had imposed order. Order made the sentences more shapely. Shapeliness increased the expressiveness of the language. Expressiveness deepened association. At last, a dramatic buildup occurred... this buildup is called texture. It was the texture that had stirred me... The speaker’s effort to recall with exactness how things had been between herself and the dead woman... had caused her to say so much that I

became aware at last of all that was *not* being said; that which could never be said.” (*The Situation and the Story* 4-5)

In this definition, composing means adding expressiveness and texture to create a cumulative organization that allows the emotional truth (here described as “that which could never be said”) to emerge. Comparing this definition with Gornick’s description of the changes she made in *Fierce Attachments*, it is evident that within Vivian Gornick’s definition of creative nonfiction, rearranging timelines or using composite characters falls into the category of composition and not invention. This kind of composition gives creative nonfiction its highly misunderstood creative component, though understanding this creativity seems to be an essential characteristic of Gornick’s informed reader.

Sterling’s was not the only critique of Gornick’s work that emerged in the weeks following the Goucher lecture. Maureen Corrigan, a lecturer and critic-in-residence at Georgetown University as well as book critic for National Public Radio, gave a scathing review of Gornick’s then sixteen-year-old memoir and her comments at Goucher, comparing Gornick to such notorious literary liars as Binjamin Wilkomirski, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Jayson Blair (“Book Critic Maureen Corrigan”)—writers who Gornick then described respectively as “a psychopath who invented a memoir of testament out of whole cloth; a historian who is accused of incorporating other people’s work into her own without attribution; and a dishonest newspaper reporter who made up interviews in the *New York Times*” (“A Memoirist Defends”). Corrigan’s reaction to Gornick’s lecture is both indignant and also, like Sterling’s, unexpectedly emotional. On August 5, during a segment of NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Corrigan expressed feelings of betrayal and disappointment over Gornick’s “admission”, feelings that could be the result of the ignorance Gornick forced upon her readers since Corrigan never willfully chose ignorance. She explained that she felt “disheartened” by all these writers’ transgressions, and that the connection between

them “is the sense of betrayal felt by a reader who’s been encouraged to believe that a particular book is trying to be faithful to what actually happened and who then subsequently learns otherwise” (“You as a reader”).

Like Sterling before her (and perhaps even more so) Corrigan’s language shows the depth of her “disheartenment.” She explains,

“Autobiography is a genre that is defined solely by a handshake. There’s not an internal distinction between an autobiographical novel and an autobiography. Rather, it’s the autobiographer’s pledge to try to tell the truth that makes a reader respond differently. I say try because, as the theorists rightly point out, auto is an impossible genre. Time and literary style inevitably distort memories, and the person writing is not the same person who lives the life. But the autobiographer gives his or her word to try, and we readers give our trust, and when this quaint contract turns out to be a con, we feel like rubes” (“Book Critic”).

Corrigan’s indignation over Gornick’s actions indicates that she feels as if a concrete, binding contract has been violated, but here she openly admits that this autobiographical contract can be defined “solely by a handshake.” This stands in stark contrast to the contractually binding rules of journalism, which are defined by much more than a handshake; the Society of Professional Journalists publishes a code of ethics that is updated annually. Thus, Corrigan, in her indignation, is applying the strictness and harshness of the written rules of journalism, but she does this to a genre whose rules she herself says are recorded only in a handshake. She admits that the creative nonfiction contract is not concrete or binding by reacting emotionally to its violation, as seen in her choice of words when she calls herself and other readers “rubes” and “dopes” (pejorative terms for the willfully ignorant) when their trust is broken.

Corrigan continued to reveal her own emotions in another *Salon* article following her NPR review: “It adds insult to injury to be told by the autobiographer in question that, in accepting the conventional autobiographical contract that the writer is, indeed, trying to write the truth, you, as a reader, are a dope” (“You as a reader”). In this analogy, the readers are the

unsuspecting and innocent carnival-goers, and Vivian Gornick is the carnival worker who deceitfully takes advantage of her customers by fixing the game to work in her favor—the use of one small word goes a long way in defining the “good guys” and “bad guys” in this conflict and clearly shows the emotional undercurrent of Corrigan’s response. That Corrigan would react so sensitively to Gornick’s “deceit” shows how widely creative nonfiction, and especially the role of ignorance, is misunderstood even among professional readers.

Though it is a common idiom, Corrigan’s use of the phrase “It adds insult to injury” is perhaps more fitting than she realized. She intended for the phrase to refer to Gornick’s initial offense of publishing a memoir that ignored journalistic standards of truth, which was then exacerbated by her second offense of telling her reacting readers that they were not well informed. But the “injury” here can also refer to Corrigan’s emotional pain—injurious feelings of betrayal and misuse. The insult referred to opens up an additional underlying cause of her criticism—the discovery that she had been lied to not only stirred up feelings of betrayal but also of indignation. This professional reader has been made to look like a rube and a dope along with the rest of Gornick’s readership, and this demotion is galling. If Corrigan reacts with this kind of resentment, she must not be the informed reader Gornick is looking for.

Throughout her response to Gornick, Corrigan seems to suggest that the reader’s trust—a sense of guilelessness in a corrupt and deceitful world—is to be valued and admired. For her, readers are always in the right when they offer their trust, and any writer who betrays that trust is always in the wrong. We might see this as Corrigan’s definition of the ignorance Gornick feels is necessary for the ideal reader of *Fierce Attachments*. For Corrigan, this kind of ignorance is something to be valued and protected in a reader, sheltered from the possibility of dishonesty, but this differs from Gornick’s idea of “willful ignorance,”

For ignorance to be willful, it seems, the reader must actively choose to trust the writer, not just passively begin reading and assume the story will be factually accurate—and that is exactly what Corrigan lauds readers for doing. Gornick’s ideal reader doesn’t read her book blindly and submissively—her reader willfully chooses to trust her. Somehow, there is an element of knowledge embedded in Gornick’s idea of willful ignorance, and this is perhaps why Gornick also advocated for an informed readership. The contradictions and emotion in Corrigan’s reaction indicate that she and other professional readers are not among that informed readership.

### **Popular Responses to Gornick’s Goucher Lecture and *Salon* Defense**

The largest segment of Gornick’s readership—non-professional readers who appreciate literature but have no special training in literary theory or criticism—also responded loudly to both the opinions Gornick expressed at Goucher and her defense thereafter. After the publication of Sterling’s, Gornick’s, and Corrigan’s essays in *Salon*, the magazine was bombarded with letters from angry readers. One, a woman who identified herself online as Kathe, wrote sarcastically:

Thank goodness for Ms. Gornick. For nearly a thousand years, English-speaking people have understood that a memoir is a “written account, description, document containing the facts in a case which is to be judged” (according to the Oxford English Dictionary). I am so grateful to her for informing us stupid readers that we are wrong, and that a memoir is, instead, what she wants it to be. While I expected a work labeled “memoir” to reflect personal bias and mistakes due to memory, now I understand that Ms. Gornick is

instead teaching it as a way to write fiction without having to try so hard. What a relief.

(“Letters”)

This belittling comment shows how far Gornick has fallen in this reader’s esteem. The deep trust Corrigan references has been broken here, and the reader has reacted bitterly to that disappointment. The reader’s sarcastic line, “Ms. Gornick is instead teaching [memoir] as a way to write fiction without having to try so hard” shows not only a disenchantment with Gornick and a belief that memoirs should beautifully represent verifiable facts, but also that this reader does not recognize the existence of both emotional and experiential truths. Implying that the changes that Gornick made were motivated by laziness instead of an effort to compose her experience suggests that this letter writer is not an informed reader, either. This idea also shows that this reader has a skewed idea of where the “effort” lies in creative nonfiction—to her, telling the truth is easy, but making something up is difficult.

Another “everyday reader”, this one identified on *Salon* as Ron, wrote:

So Vivian Gornick’s best defense is that her memoir is real even when it’s made up, and readers who complain about accuracy are just too literal-minded and unsophisticated to know how to approach the genre properly? Whatever. Maybe some readers do cling too tenaciously to the idea that you can’t make stuff up about your life ...[but] it seems to me just as likely that Gornick might need to let go of the idea that the stories she tells about herself are “true” just because she believes in their aesthetic merit. (“Letters”)

This reader too, just like the literary critics and the previous reader, reacts with annoyance at Gornick’s justifications, dismissing her with a cold, “Whatever.” Most interestingly, however, is the last line of Ron’s comment—that a memoirist cannot see her stories as true “just because she believes in their aesthetic merit.” This remark seems to indicate that Ron does understand, at least to some degree, the difference between emotional and experiential truth—experiential truth is true because it is factual and perhaps confirmable, while emotional truth is true because of the aesthetic effect it has on the reader, which is intended to mimic the effect it had originally on the

writer. However, though he understands the difference between the two kinds of truth, this reader seems to fundamentally disagree that emotional truth should be valued above experiential truth, or perhaps even at all. Ron is, in his way, an informed reader, but not a willfully ignorant one. His is not a misunderstanding of what the genre entails or the difference between creative nonfiction and journalism, but a basic disagreement about values.

This reader's response, therefore, is extremely valuable to this thesis. It hints at the source of the trouble with creative nonfiction—if the writers of a genre do not hold the same value systems of their readers, that genre will inevitably face controversies and misunderstandings. Though the qualifications for an informed reader are still unclear, it seems likely that this reader, with his fundamental disagreement about what matters in writing, does not serve the purpose that an informed reader does for Vivian Gornick. And though professional and non-professional readers approach texts with very different mindsets, they both reacted emotionally to Gornick's "revelation", which suggests that being educated does not prevent readers from having an emotional response that they feel supersedes the intentions of a writer. From all these comments, it must be noted that the creative nonfiction contract, though its handshake may offer little contractual validity, has high emotional stakes that limit much of the readership's ability to willfully choose ignorance. Emotion hobbles the writers' ability to make meaning as they see fit as well as the readers' ability to trust the writers as curators of their own stories.

### **Creating an Informed Readership**

If being informed does not necessarily accompany an education in literary criticism and theory, and if this need for informed-ness is confounded by the emotional obstacles a reader

brings to the table, how then can people become the informed readers Gornick requires? This is perhaps best served by asking *who* informs the readers, since the evidence with professional and non-professional readers suggests that readers do not inform themselves. In her rebuttal to Gornick, the last edition in the tumult of courtroom dramatics on the pages of *Salon*, Maureen Corrigan suggested that it is the responsibility of the author to teach the audience how to read a work of creative nonfiction. She writes:

Each and every autobiography instructs its readers on how to read it. Many famous autobiographies — like Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* — intermingle fact and fiction, condense scenes, play with chronology, or otherwise acknowledge the indeterminacy of absolute truth that thinkers from Freud to Foucault have taught us is a defining condition of modernity. These autobiographies are explicit about their indirect efforts to capture experience on the page. Other autobiographies include a prefatory note stating that some scenes or characters have been fictionalized. But when the writer of a memoir or an autobiography doesn’t provide one of these signals, readers tend to take her at her word: They assume she’s forged her art out of a good-faith accounting of her life, as she honestly understood and remembered it. (Corrigan)

As Corrigan explains it in an article in *Salon*, she doesn’t disagree with the use of composite scenes and characters as much as she does Gornick’s choice to not warn her through a “prefatory note” (“You, as a reader”). This is an alarming difference from the heated response outlined in Corrigan’s earlier NPR broadcast, and perhaps more alarming is the idea that a prefatory note can alleviate so much controversy. According to Corrigan, this simple gesture apparently gives creative nonfiction writers *carte blanche*, allowing them to make whatever changes they want *as long as they have warned the reader first*.

Gornick’s choice to exclude an author’s note, however, was deliberate; her ideal readers must read the book while “willfully ignorant.” The implication here is that the ignorance she wants in a reader has too important an effect on the reception of a text to jeopardize with any

explanation, though we have yet to define said ignorance in any practical terms (and frankly, neither has Gornick).

Perhaps the best way to discover what willful ignorance is, is to discover what is it not. Many successful nonfiction writers inform their readers via author's notes, so a lack of willful ignorance must not be detrimental to every memoir. Tobias Wolff, a writer of both fiction and nonfiction and a well-known advocate for strict honesty in creative nonfiction, includes an author's note at the beginning on his 1989 memoir *This Boy's Life*:

“I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I've allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it a truthful story.” (Wolff 1)

Though this short note might seem like a deflection (or even a kind of “cop-out”), for Corrigan, a small gesture like this sets a very accepting stage for the reader. Wolff casually assures the reader that yes, he might have composed some of the contents, but they are no more consequential than the description of the questionably handsome dog. Alongside that levity, he also makes it clear that any composing was done to make the story more truthful and faithful to his subjective experience, not to abuse or fool the reader. With these assurances, readers can feel comfortable as they move forward with the story, especially if they are reading with a passive, assuming trust, as Corrigan did with Gornick.

Simply by saying that he has “been corrected on some points... [but] I've allowed some of these points to stand” (1), Wolff explains that his memoir values the emotional truth over the experiential. Even when confronted with the experiential truth, he chose to maintain the emotional truth conveyed by his less-accurate account because that is the version of truth that mattered to him and that survived in his memory. And in the parting line, “I have done my best to make it a truthful story” (1) he assures the reader that he has taken both kinds of truth into

consideration, that he has tried to represent them both. Not only does this note give a privileged glimpse into the writer's thought process, it also subtly tries to shape the readers' attitudes about the genre. By quietly calling attention to his own values, Wolff guides the reader to adopt the same standards. This note tells the reader, "This is how I understand it and make it work—join me." It is a move towards informing and away from ignorance. Wolff's author's note serves to inform the reader on a local, book-focused level as well as on a global, genre-focused level. If ignorance was Gornick's goal, then she was wise to avoid an informative note like Tobias Wolff's because his sole goal is to inform readers about the two kinds of truth and the writer's right to privilege one over the other.

Like Wolff in *This Boy's Life*, memoirist Mary Karr includes a warning to her readers in the prologue to her 2009 memoir *Lit* acknowledging that there will surely be a division between the experiential and emotional truths of her story: "Any way I tell this story is a lie, so I ask you to disconnect the device in your head that repeats at intervals how ancient and addled I am... I want to show the whole tale as I know it, scary as that strikes me at this juncture" (1), Karr preempts any distrust from her readers by acknowledging upfront that the story will inevitably be a lie by some standard, and then she shows them the standard she would like them to use to measure her work. Just as Gornick's ideal reader willfully chooses ignorance, if Karr's readers will "disconnect the device," which she later calls the "video camera you've had strapped to your face since you were big enough to push the red Record button," (1) then they will be able to look past the experiential truth and see instead the "whole tale", or the emotional truth. Here, just as Wolff taught his readers how to be informed, Karr teaches her readers how to be ignorant—by dismantling the recorder that constantly reminds us of the differences between life as it happened experientially and life as it is presented on the page.

It's also worth noting that, while both notes acknowledge their memoirs are not altogether faithful to experiential truth, and though Wolff jokingly cites a difference of opinion about a "fact" of a dog, neither author points out any *specific* deviations from fact. This might indicate that, from the perspective of these two authors, the reader doesn't need to know those specificities (such as the walks of *Fierce Attachments* being composed outside of the literal history). In fact, knowing where the writer has intervened or her memory has failed can prevent the reader from being able to fully engage in the text and experience the emotional truth of the story. If readers were informed beforehand of the specific changes authors made, they would likely only look for those changes as they read and wonder why the author had done it. The change would be nullified and its strengthening influence on the texture, the emotional truth, quashed. Perhaps these notes operate with the understanding that the reader needs to be ignorant of specific changes in order to appreciate their effect.

The few nonspecific sentences in a prefatory note can appease readers who, when they learn of the specific moments in a book in which they are "duped," become emotional and unforgiving. Thus, these authors' notes give us a glimpse of what Gornick's riddle means and how these two seemingly incongruous traits, ignorance and information, actually go hand-in-hand and work together to create the ideal reader. The remaining question here is why Gornick feels that an author's note would preclude her readers' ignorance—Karr's note taught her readers how to be ignorant, so why couldn't Gornick's? What does it mean to not want to offer that in a prefatory note? Gornick seems to resist this kind of teaching moment on an artistic level. Perhaps she simply views the creation of art and commentary on that art as necessarily separate events—she was willing to comment on her craft during her lecture at Goucher but not in her actual book. The difference here has to do with the choice the writer and reader make. Because Gornick has

chosen not to show her reader the tricks of the trade, she expects the reader to willfully choose to be ignorant of them and proceed anyway. The crux here is Gornick's stipulation that her readers need to be *willfully* ignorant, meaning that they choose to be ignorant—and, paradoxically, in order to make that kind of choice, the reader must be informed.

### **Creating a Balance Between Information and Ignorance**

Finally, after analyzing reader reactions and author's notes, we can formulate an answer to Gornick's paradox. Readers need to be informed enough to understand the difference between emotional and experiential truth, and Gornick and Karr suggest that they should will themselves to be ignorant of which points in the story have been composed. This will allow them to engage freely with the emotional facts of the memoir—or, in other words, to make meaning from the emotional truth. Not knowing the specifics of the experiential truth allows the reader to maintain a sense of belief and participate in the emotional truth, which is the basis for making meaning out of a story. Informed readers also value the attitude of acceptance with which they approach a work of creative nonfiction.

This is ultimately what it means to be an informed and ignorant reader: knowing enough to approach a book as if you know nothing—having enough information about creative nonfiction and the value of emotional truth to sacrifice an aspect your curiosity and choose to remain ignorant of any changes or manipulation of the facts. An informed and ignorant reader understands that this approach will allow them to participate fully in the emotional truth of the story and will enrich their overall reading experience as they turn each page unencumbered by the weight of wondering what's factual and what isn't.

One of the readers who sent a letter to *Salon* in response to Gornick's essay, Ron, fulfilled half of the requirements of an ideal reader. Ron understood the difference between emotional and experiential truth, but he did not choose to value the emotional *over* the experiential. Because he made this choice, Ron was informed, but not willfully ignorant. One final *Salon* reader, who posts online comments as Tricia—one of the few who wrote to *Salon* in Gornick's defense—shows that it is indeed possible to reconcile these conflicting attributes:

[A literature professor I know] says that in poetry, the writer has to be true to the feeling. That doesn't necessarily mean being true to the facts. I believe the same is true for memoir. I appreciate a memoirist's effort to glean what's important from the tale and skip the tedious details, and I think most readers would have that same appreciation if they knew what had been left out of the story. ("Letters")

Tricia clearly understands and values emotional truth, and though she suspects that she would still hold those values if she did know the specific changes that an author made, she chooses to be ignorant and not ask for that information. This is a perfect example of *willful* ignorance—because she understands “what's important from the tale”, she has managed to balance being both informed and willfully ignorant.

Misunderstanding emotional truth and experiential truth is still a relentless problem today, and it impedes the progress and development of creative nonfiction as a genre of literature rather than reportage. This problem makes the process through which a writer informs or doesn't inform her readers an important point for exploration, because as the Gornick controversy shows, the balance between information and ignorance is essential to making meaning in creative nonfiction.

### Chapter 3: *Lying* and the End of the Trusting Reader

Vivian Gornick was not the first writer to interpret the “creative nonfiction” label loosely, though she was one of the first to be so widely criticized for her nonfiction ethics. In 2000, three years before Gornick read at Goucher and unintentionally exposed herself to critics’ and readers’ scorn, psychologist-turned-memoirist Lauren Slater published a “metaphorical memoir” called *Lying*. In it, she playfully confronts the blurry line between fiction and nonfiction, openly questioning the authenticity of her memoir itself. *Lying* takes the idea of an unreliable narrator to a whole new level by blatantly doubting her own honesty from within the text, but what makes this book unique is not just Slater’s unreliability, but also the accepting attitude with which her memoir was received. This reception was due in part to Slater’s unexpected honesty about her dishonesty in the book and also to the careful, often overt commentary she makes in the text about creative nonfiction and how to read memoir. Where Gornick refuses to inform her readers in the name of willful ignorance, and Tobias Wolff and Mary Karr inform indirectly with prefatory notes, Slater informs her readers unequivocally and frequently throughout the text of her memoir, making both her meaning and the interplay of experiential and emotional truth unavoidable.

#### Teaching Readers to Question—and Not Care

If Maureen Corrigan was correct in saying all autobiographies instruct their readers on how to read them, Slater begins teaching her audience to read her memoir with one eyebrow cocked, beginning with the provocative title, and continuing in chapter one, which consists of a single sentence: “I exaggerate” (Slater 3). Slater weaves more instructions for her reader into the

rest of her story, which she calls “a tale I have tried over and over again to utter, the story of my past, of my mother and me, the story of the strange and fitful illnesses claiming most of my moments...my love of myths and proclivities toward deceit” (220). Slater offers the story of her childhood bouts of epilepsy, the corpus colostomy that alleviated them, and the propensity for lying and exaggeration she inherited from her mother, all of which are undercut by the warning that she might be lying even while telling these stories, too. Her tale is both intriguing in its detail and depth and maddening in its refusal to admit what is real and what is not.

The experience of reading *Lying* is at once exasperating and enchanting, and Slater uses this experience to teach the reader not only about who she is and what she experienced, as all memoirists do, but also about creative nonfiction and how to navigate the insufficient definitions that demarcate fiction and nonfiction. In short, she teaches that definitions matter far less than story itself.

Slater warns her readers early on that she might be confusing fact with fiction (6), thus allowing for errors in her memory, but as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Slater’s departures from the factual narrative of her life are not accidental. In a chapter written as a memo to her editor to discuss whether to market the book as fiction or nonfiction, she writes,

I have decided not to tell you what is fact versus what is unifact primarily because I am giving you a portrait of the essence of me ... Come with me, reader. I am toying with you, yes, but for a real reason. I am asking you to enter the confusion with me, to give up the ground with me... Enter that lostness with me. Live in the place I am, where the view is murky... Together we will journey. We are disoriented, and all we ever really want is a hand to hold. (163)

Not only is this admission candid about the duplicity of the narrative, but it is also an important instruction for the reader: I am *trying* to frustrate and confuse you because that is how my reality—my emotional truth-- has made me feel. Understand that, and you now understand me and my story better. This then prevents ignorance of the presence of unfacts while still forcing a

kind of information as well as ignorance of the particular unfacts. Though the form is different and difficult, the effect of moments like this is not unlike Wolff's and Karr's author's notes—Slater is likewise teaching her readers how to be informed, how to be ignorant, and how to appreciate the freedom that gives them to make meaning in the text.

Slater returns to this lesson over and over again. She chides her readers when she writes, “I am passionately dedicated to the truth, which, by the way, is not necessarily the same thing as fact, so loosen up!” (160). By anticipating the audience reaction, she is able to instruct them candidly about her priorities as a writer and what their priorities should be as readers. She continues, “What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons fade and stutter, but *the narrative truth*, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful” (219, emphasis added). What clearer way could there be to teach readers about the difference between emotional and experiential truth than to directly state your project's ethical priorities for the readers? These instructions are knit into the remainder of the memoir, paragraph upon paragraph, enabling Slater to simultaneously tell her story and teach her audience how to read it.

Slater writes in the faux-letter to her editor that her purpose in writing *Lying* “is, among a lot of other things, to ponder the blurry line between novels and memoirs” (160). This unacknowledged blurry line is the reason for so many of the reactionary responses to creative nonfiction. Slater's memoir is meant to be not only a representation of who Lauren Slater is and what she has experienced but also a kind of meditation on how we define literary genres that ultimately asks, does it even matter (160)?

While Slater implicitly argues for a capacious definition of nonfiction, she also explains that the goal of creative nonfiction should be to show who the writer is by whatever means

necessary. She explains her “slippery” relationship to truth when she writes, “From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are” (5).

Aside from these abstract concepts, the central question of *Lying* is whether Slater has epilepsy or not—she questions her credibility as often as she explicitly states that she is an epileptic—but immediately following these lines, she writes, “I am an epileptic. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic, glittering place I had in my mother’s heart” (5). This line may indirectly tell the audience that Slater doesn’t have epilepsy, but it also tells them that it doesn’t really matter because the story of what she wishes is another way, maybe a more accurate way, to represent who she is. As she puts it, “Perhaps I was, and still am, a pretender, a person who creates illness because she needs time, attention, touch, because she knows no other way of telling her life’s tale” (88). This kind of commentary straddles the line between information and ignorance in a different way than other, more “straight”, memoirs do, but the result is that the reader comes closer to a more complete understanding of Slater’s character.

While other memoirs, Wolff’s and Karr’s for example, warn the reader in a prefatory note that some content has elegantly composed and then encourage the reader to tuck that understanding away somewhere where it won’t encumber their reading of the text, Slater admits over and over again that she might be lying. This forces the readers to face head-on the difference between emotional and experiential truth and between information and ignorance. They have to continually accept information as Slater admits her deception and consistently choose to be ignorant of the experiential truth anyway—because if they do make that choice, they can “enter that lostness” with Slater and making meaning out of her story.

While some might call Slater's contention that "what you wish is every bit as real as what you are" a weak justification for lying, both subtly and overtly, to the audience, Slater labels these lies as metaphors: "Even those things that are not literally true about me are metaphorically true about me, and that's an important point" (162). The only way Slater has found to tell the complicated story of her mental health and her "slipperiness" is through a messy and self-aware extended metaphor.

For example, at the end of her memoir, Slater sets up a kind of meta-metaphor when she describes preparing to give a "drunk-a-logue" to an Alcoholics Anonymous group that she had been attending for several months and whom she had told she was a recovering alcoholic—one of many lies she tells about various illnesses. This speech was meant to be an honest account of her history with drinking, but, in reality, Slater had never even been drunk. Wanting to be honest for once, Slater deliberates with herself, "Alcoholism can stand in for epilepsy, the same way epilepsy can stand in for depression, for disintegration, for self-hatred, for the unspeakable dirt between a mother and a daughter; sometimes you don't know how to say the pain directly—I do not know how to say the pain directly" (203-4). Slater has simply chosen a standardized illness to describe her non-standardized symptoms and pain; in this memoir she has chosen epilepsy, but she might as well have chosen alcoholism or any number of other disorders. The metaphorical relationship would not be less emotionally true. The metaphor of the story—whatever metaphor she chooses—is essential to making meaning out of the story.

If the reader misses the metaphor or ignores its complexity, he will miss Slater "telling herself," a risk Slater anticipated by giving an early draft of the *Lying* manuscript to strangers and asking for their reactions. In the book, she reports that they "took it all quite literally, like it was just one more true account of yet another disease. Well, it's not. If you read it that way, I

will feel I have failed” (162). Slater’s intention with *Lying* is to cause readers to continually question the value of emotional truth over experiential, so of course they aren’t supposed to take the story literally, but this sense of failure might ring true for other writers of creative nonfiction as well. Perhaps Gornick did not intend for her audience to take her story literally either and maybe she too felt a sense of failure when it was. All this work brings us closer to the concept that literalness is not the goal of literature, and Gornick’s ideal reader understands that and values the literary truth more than the literal.

### **Critical Response to *Lying***

What is possibly most significant about Slater’s memoir is how often she *didn’t* fail. As evidence that she understood and approved Slater’s objective, Vanessa Friedman, book reviewer for *Entertainment Weekly*, urged readers not to “dismiss the book as the ramblings of a crazy woman. Her arguments are beautifully shaped; her prose--especially the descriptions of her childhood--blunt and searing. In the end, does it matter if you know what's real and what's fantasy?” (Friedman). The *Women’s Review of Books* added, “Were it less deftly written, it would be infuriating (Nash).

Positive reviews of the book weren’t scarce, but more interesting are the reviews that found the book infuriating despite its deft writing. The New York Times Book review warned,

[*Lying*] might appeal to a dedicated deconstructionist; others, though, will find it unrewardingly wearing. “*Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*” wants to be as charismatic and infuriating as an epileptic, which is a risky strategy, because when it does this most successfully, it is also at its most alienating. It’s a tricky book -- a sick book, even, metaphorically speaking.” (Mead)

While this review rates the book poorly overall and doesn’t buy into Slater’s overall metaphor, it is important to note that it doesn’t criticize her lies, her admissions of dishonesty, or her critiques

of genre restrictions. Negative reviews took issue with her literary methods, not her nonfiction ethics. This review also discusses the effect of the *book* on the critic, not the effect of the *author*, as Corrigan did with Gornick. In other words, it gives *Lying* literary standing—not journalistic standing.

Part of the reason *Lying* met more critical acceptance in 2000 than Gornick would in 2003 is certainly that Slater is deliberately honest about her dishonesty upfront. Audiences felt sideswiped when Gornick admitted to shaping her memoir more than a decade after her memoir's publication, while the heavy-handed suggestions sprinkled throughout Slater's memoir immediately taught readers to be suspicious throughout, and thus helped them avoid feeling betrayed. In the 14 years between the publication of Gornick's memoir and her lecture at Goucher College, readers had formed a fierce attachment to the "truth" of the book and were all the more devastated to learn later that their attachment was founded on what they saw as lying.

This perhaps shows, then, that when an author writes a preface or includes a narrative theme early in the book that describes the book's relationship to truth, readers have only a little time to become attached to any one version of the truth, and this short period of ignorance frees them up to make informed decisions about the text. If this is the case, then a preface is not valuable for what it says (since, as shown in the previous chapter, most author's notes don't give specifics) but for how it minimizes the time between a reader feeling altogether trusting and passive and learning that the author might be manipulating the truth that they trust.

However, this minimized period of reader vulnerability and Slater's upfront honesty do not fully explain the degree of difference between the critical reactions to Slater and Gornick. Three years separated the publication of Slater's *Lying* and Gornick's guest lecture at Goucher, and yet the latter author was lambasted for much more subtle and inconsequential "lies." A shift

in literary criticism trends might have occurred during that interval, and what was acceptable in creative nonfiction might have changed in the transition between two literary movements. The first decade of the new millennium was certainly an unstable period not just within literary circles but also for the nation as a whole, and sensitivity to “unfacts” in literature increased during this time, perhaps partly as a result of this transitional instability.

### **The Social and Literary Climate of the Early 2000s**

In order to understand the shift that occurred in the early 2000s, examining authors and their texts is not enough. A basic dose in argument reveals that these two groups make up only two-thirds of the “rhetorical triangle”—the final third consists of the audience. The change in literary climate was driven by reader reaction, as we have already seen in the case of Vivian Gornick. What did the readers’ emotional context consist of during the time period between Slater’s *Lying* and Gornick’s lecture at Goucher? How were they affected by the texts they read and why?

Of course, the defining American event of the early 2000s was the attacks on the World Trade Center. The effect that the attacks had on the nation’s psyche cannot be overstated—Americans were deeply shaken by 9/11, and our attitudes about trust changed a great deal as a consequence.

One of the major characteristics of this change has been a greater need for rules and regulations to protect citizens and prevent further attacks. Since 9/11, more than 263 government organizations have been created to reduce terrorist threats, and more than 130 pieces of 9/11-related legislation had been submitted to Congress by 2003, including the controversial Patriot Act (Villemez). These new organizations and laws show that as a nation, we want structure and

clear delineations of right and wrong. The attacks turned the world upside down for Americans, and in the aftermath we rushed to regulate and restrict as an act of re-righting.

Further, many Americans rebuilt their lives to include a guardedness and wariness of others. Academics have called this “sense of permanent vulnerability... the most fundamental impact of 9/11” (Ó hÉochaidh). One historian said, “9/11 put America into an unfamiliar ‘defensive crouch.’ It triggered a mad rush to protect ourselves” (Goldstein). Perhaps this defensive crouch prompted the rush of rules and regulations and best characterizes the attitude of Americans after 9/11, not just in the political and social arenas but also in all areas of our lives, even in academia and the arts.

There may be a correlation between our need for new laws to clearly delineate right and wrong after 9/11 and the push for distinct boundaries between fiction and nonfiction that occurred around the same time. While Americans lost their willingness to trust other people, readers lost their willingness to trust authors. This would indicate that, in 2000, Lauren Slater published her metaphorical memoir for a much more accepting and trusting audience than did Vivian Gornick when she revealed her memoir methodology post 9-11. In 2000, readers were willfully trusting even when they weren’t willfully ignorant. Perhaps pre-9/11 readers were willing to go on a journey of discovery with the author and answer Slater when she called, “Come with me, reader” (163). Maybe post-9/11 readers are more dubious, defensive, and eager to avoid being duped or taken advantage of again as they were on 9/11.

It is also possible that as readers developed a craving for clear-cut facts, the literary atmosphere changed in response to its audience, allowing an obsession with fact to seep into critical discussions. Unsurprisingly, this caused particular problems in creative nonfiction, with its thorny relationship with fact at the best of times. Perhaps September 11, 2001 ushered in an

age of infatuation with facts in the literary world, and those authors who didn't keep up with the times became the subject of scandals. Maybe 9/11 set off a chain reaction that increased Americans' sensitivity to the fact/unfact debate—the ensuing decade certainly offered enough debacles to support that theory. Some of these offenses constituted blatant deceit while others were perhaps misunderstandings at heart, but all were treated with the same wariness and condemnation.

### **The Snowball Effect**

If 9/11 did set off a chain reaction that gradually increased readers' distrust of creative nonfiction, the first scandal in the chain was the Gornick conflict. The following decade delivered scandal after scandal that seemed to justify readers' distrust, validating and increasing their feelings of suspicion and, as the scandals transpired in quick succession, creating a kind of snowball effect. With every incident, readers became more sensitive and doubtful, preparing them to more quickly condemn the next writer who consciously manipulated facts to any degree. By looking at five post-9/11 controversies that have significantly affected the literary atmosphere we are facing now, I will show that though the reader outrage over some scandals was more justified than for others, by the end of the decade readers' sensitivity and inclination to denounce writers had grown to unreasonable levels.

After the Gornick conflict in August 2003, the next significant nonfiction scandal involved James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, a memoir about his drug addiction, rehab, and time spent in prison. First published in April 2003, the book topped the bestseller lists for fifteen weeks and received praise from critics. *Booklist*'s review called the book "starkly honest" and continued, "Mincing no words, Frey bravely faces his struggles head on, and readers will be

mesmerized by his account of his ceaseless battle against addiction” (Huntley). This was a work that deeply affected its readership with its inspiring journey to redemption.

It is important to note, however, that in the midst of these accolades, some publications also called the authenticity of Frey’s novel into question, like when a *New Yorker* critic commented, “...the cinematic quality of some of Frey's exploits makes you wonder whether the facts in this memoir have been enhanced” (Miller) and when *The Village Voice* reported, “His suffering is both incredible... and simply not credible” (Browning). These reviewers’ questions are aimed at moments in the book that seem fantastic, like Frey’s escape to Paris after jumping bail in Ohio, where he tells a priest all the ways he has destroyed his life, only to then have the priest make a move on him, reaching for his crotch and prompting Frey to beat him nearly to death (Frey 359).

In 2006, after three years of faint misgivings, an investigative website called *The Smoking Gun* conducted an investigation into the veracity of Frey’s claims. After looking at “police reports, court records, interviews with law enforcement personnel, and other sources,” *The Smoking Gun* proved that Frey “wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw ‘wanted in three states’” (Frey, 153).

*The Smoking Gun* suggests that these events were fabricated solely to increase the drama of Frey’s story because it is attempting to be a story of redemption and recovery, which is that much more evocative if the criminal has fallen that much farther. The power of the story, on which so many of the initial reviews remarked, had been rooted in its honest portrayal of reality. Readers responded to Frey’s tragic story because it felt real to them—and that is also why they felt so betrayed when they found out that it wasn’t.

Oprah Winfrey had added Frey's memoir to her book club in 2004, and she invited him back to her show to confront him about the *Smoking Gun* report. In front of a tense studio audience, Winfrey asked, "Why did you lie? Why did you do that?" The transcript reads:

James: In order to get through the experience of the addiction, I thought of myself as being tougher than I was and badder than I was—and it helped me cope. When I was writing the book ... instead of being as introspective as I should have been, I clung to that image.

Oprah: And did you cling to that image because that's how you wanted to see yourself? Or did you cling to that image because that would make a better book?

James: Probably both. (Oprah)

Oprah's feelings of betrayal were shared by many readers, who wrote in with comments like, "I was halfway through his book when I found out some of it wasn't true. That was it for me... I never picked it up again", "This guy is a POS for portraying his life as he did as REAL. PHONIES hurt everyone. If it was FICTION, it should have been LABELED FICTION [sic]", and "What would you do for a Klondike bar, what would you do to sell a book..." (Oprah).

Readers' disgust with Frey centered on the self-serving agenda of Frey's lies—at least in previous literary scandals writers had claimed that they were unfaithful for the sake of truth or art. Frey's memoir was exactly what Gornick's Goucher audience was afraid would happen if greater creative license were given to an artists less skilled and ethical than Gornick. The Frey scandal justified and deepened readers' distrust of a memoirist's ability to present his or her character honestly, ensuring that readers would be a little less trusting the next time around.

The next time around happened to be just a few months later, when a mysterious young novelist's identity turned out to be a fabrication. JT Leroy's life story was not unlike Frey's in that he too had to overcome intense obstacles to build a life for himself—Leroy's mother pimped him out at truck stops as a child until he ran away to prostitute himself. As his story goes, a young couple named Laura Albert and Geoffrey Knoop befriended the boy and discovered his

storytelling talent. He began a career as a novelist, writing autobiographical fiction based on his experiences with child prostitution and drugs. Leroy began appearing in public in sunglasses and a wig, which few questioned because of his past cross-dressing. As it turned out, there was cross-dressing happening, but it was a young woman named Savannah Knoop, Geoffrey Knoop's sister, dressing up as JT Leroy. Eventually, Savannah Knoop was recognized while playing Leroy and her identity was revealed. She was not, however, the writer of Leroy's stories—that honor was Laura Albert's, the woman who had supposedly taken Leroy in off the streets.

When readers, who had connected with the character they came to understand through his fiction and interviews, found out that his identity and struggle were a lie, they were heartbroken. Leroy's literary agent wrote, "To present yourself as a person who is dying of AIDS in a culture which has lost so many writers and voices of great meaning, to take advantage of that sympathy and empathy, is the most unfortunate part of all of this. A lot of people believed they were supporting not only a good and innovative and adventurous voice, but that we were supporting a person" (qtd. in St. John).

The Leroy scandal left readers feeling taken advantage of and emotionally mistreated, and it created a suspicion that the narrators who presented stories to them in books--even books of autobiographical fiction--were all a persona and did not reflect the writers' true personality. Readers learned that they could not trust a writer's presentation of himself on the page. This intensified the harm that Frey had caused only months before, thus snowballing into a pervasive wariness of creative nonfiction writers and creating the beginnings of an expectation that these writers were eventually going to lie to them.

After the emotional letdown readers suffered with JT Leroy, they felt all the more justified in being suspicious of stories presented to them as truth. It wasn't long after the Leroy

scandal that the Greg Mortenson scandal broke (previously discussed in the introduction). That story also played on the emotions of the readers, making them believe in the innate goodness of humanity as the philanthropist adventurer Mortenson did when impoverished Pakistani villagers rescued him. Learning that Mortenson's presentation of the villagers who helped him and of the "terrorists" who held him captive was doctored showed readers that writers couldn't be trusted to characterize other people accurately any more than they could be trusted to represent themselves truthfully. But there was more to come: in early 2012, Mike Daisey, an author, monologist, and actor, was put in the spotlight when NPR's *This American Life* discovered that Daisey had lied in a story about the working conditions in Apple's Chinese factories.

Daisey described finding underage workers in Apple's factories, guards with guns at the gates, and workers being poisoned by a cleaner used on iPhone screens. He painted his trip to the gates of the factory as radical, not the kind of thing that visiting journalists do in China. These details all grabbed the attention of professional journalists working in China and rang false for them. *This American Life* issued a retraction of the segment, devoting a whole show to exploring and correcting Daisey's inaccuracies. They reported that because it is illegal in China, the factory guards never carry guns. They confirmed that journalists regularly interview workers at the gates of factories in China and explained that the story about workers being poisoned was true, but it happened at a non-Apple factory in another province. Ira Glass said on the radio program:

As best as we can tell, Mike's monologue in reality is a mix of things that actually happened when he visited China and things that he just heard about or researched, which he then pretends that he witnessed first hand. He pretends that he just stumbled upon an array of workers who typify all kinds of harsh things somebody might face in a factory that makes iPhones and iPads. And the most powerful and memorable moments in the story all seem to be fabricated. ("Retraction")

When the truth came to light, the audience was angry, though they varied in where they directed their anger. Some condemned Daisey himself, like the listener who wrote into *This*

*American Life* saying, “I am absolutely disgusted by Mike Daisey. He just comes off to me as slimy & nasty” (Heaton). Others blamed Daisey and *This American Life* equally, writing, “What appears to me in the episode is that you want to stress the lying part of Daisey--who did make a terrible mistake. But please look at yourself again and really think hard on why would such an acclaimed show make fundamental fact check errors like this. Really disappointing (Lee). No matter who the audience blamed, these quotes show that readers/listeners were disturbed by the ease with which they were sold a factually inaccurate story.

Although Daisey didn’t lie entirely for personal gain, he sold his story as trustworthy reportage and thus had the power to affect international interactions. The Daisey debacle was yet another hit to readers’ trust, but more importantly, it showed readers how serious the consequences of lies in creative nonfiction can be. His story raised the stakes for readers—not only could a writer’s lies damage a reader’s ability to trust and thus engage with a text, but a writer’s lies could also upset global business in potentially terrible ways. Because of these high stakes, readers felt they were owed an assurance that the methods used to gain the story were ethical and credible.

Daisey’s scandal was added to the growing list of reasons readers felt they could not trust “truth” to be truthful. Each instance on that list injured the contract between writer and reader and jeopardized subsequent writers’ work, calling their intentions into question before they were even made known. Gornick’s, Frey’s, Leroy’s, Mortenson’s, and Daisey’s actions fed into one another and created a cycle in which each scandal increased the swiftness and severity of the next, while every new scandal reopened the previous wounds and justified again the readers’ indignation. Every example renewed and sharpened the harm caused by the last controversy and primed readers to challenge the next writer they encountered. This snowball effect created a

lexicon of distrust which readers became fluent in and eager to use—eventually becoming overeager and applying this lexicon to issues that did not deserve it.

In 2012, another scandal broke out, though the details differed from the previous examples. The previous writers knowingly told half-truths and untruths, but Dave Eggers, in his 2009 book *Zeitoun*, made no intentional changes to the truth, and yet he was attacked anyway. *Zeitoun* is the story of a Muslim Syrian-American man, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, who survived Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Zeitoun sent his family to safety but stayed behind to watch over their home, and after the storm, he used a canoe to move around the city, helping people move to higher ground and distributing supplies. After providing help where, by his account, no help was being given by government officials, Zeitoun was arrested for being a suspected terrorist. He was held for twenty-three days without a court hearing and denied due process, and after the ordeal he became a vocal critic of the police and unlawful detention. All these factors made his story ideal for Eggers to tell—it was dramatic, poignant, and unexpected, and audiences responded well to the positive message the book offered about Muslim Americans. For three years, the book received critical acclaim for Zeitoun’s story and Eggers’s writing, winning the American Book Award, among other accolades. However, in 2011, Zeitoun was arrested again, this time for assaulting his wife, and then again in 2012 for beating her with a tire iron. One month later, he was charged with (but not convicted of) plotting to have his now ex-wife, her son, and another man killed.

These charges didn’t fit with the character that Eggers had portrayed in his book of a quiet family man who worked tirelessly to rescue the victims of Katrina, a man who was victimized because of his religion and caught up in the anti-terrorism machine put into place during the post-9/11 hypersensitivity discussed earlier. Readers had come to know and respect

Zeitoun, to admire him and see him as an example of Muslim Americans at their best. In an interview in 2010, Eggers said, “Every day, someone comes up to [Zeitoun], shakes his hand, and says: I’m sorry on behalf of all Americans for what happened to you. The Zeitouns stand for everything that we consider all-American values: hard work, community, family, personal responsibility and that’s what he hears: that he’s an example to us all” (qtd. in Cooke). Two years later, in the wake of his divorce and arrests, readers turned on Zeitoun and on Eggers as well, believing that they had been deceived. One reviewer said,

“[Eggers] claimed in a *Rumpus* interview, ‘I think you get the most accuracy when you involve your subjects as much as possible. I think I sent the manuscript to the Zeitouns for six or seven reads. They caught little inaccuracies each time.’ Recent developments have revealed that *Zeitoun* is a misleading feel-good hagiography running against this apparent commitment to accuracy. *The New York Times Book Review*’s Timothy Egan suggested that Eggers was a modern-day ‘Charles Dickens, his sentimentality in check but his journalistic eyes wide open.’ But Eggers has glossed over a good deal more than what Egan has insinuated. Abdulrahman Zeitoun is not the calm and peaceful man that Eggers portrayed.” (Champion)

Eggers repeatedly avoided making a statement about Zeitoun or his arrests, and so the public blamed him for misinforming them, despite the fact that Zeitoun’s ex-wife, the intended victim of the murder plot, confirmed that the book “accurately portrayed their relationship at the time” (Brown). This woman was the only person, besides Zeitoun and Eggers themselves, who had the qualifications to comment on the accuracy of the story, and yet angry readers disregarded her insistence that Eggers had not misrepresented Zeitoun’s character.

The public uproar shows distrust not only of creative nonfiction writers but also of the genre as a whole. Eggers had done his job as a creative nonfiction writer, but the readers had still been duped in the end. They needed to blame someone for the betrayal they felt, and past experience had taught them that the author was usually to blame. The scandals of the previous decade had built up a cumulative effect that allowed readers to associate the harm done by one

writer with the lesser harms done by others. It didn't matter that it was the protagonist of the book who had erred and not the author—Eggers still took the brunt of the backlash and disappointment because readers couldn't imagine this kind of criminal tendency not manifesting itself over the course of Eggers' research. Because of the post-9/11 desire to see things strictly in black and white, Zeitoun had to be either a hero or a criminal. Because the cumulative effect of the previous scandals, readers and critics alike had been conditioned to distrust authors and emotional truth to such an extreme degree that even when an author had made no move to misrepresent the truth, he was still attacked when readers were disappointed by the choices of not the author but his subject, whom he had no control over nor responsibility for. This conflict can be seen as the point at which the snowball that had been swelling for the past decade became ludicrously large and began to overpower the readers building it up.

Now, in the second decade of the new millennium, readers have learned to view creative nonfiction as a genre of controversy, of going too far, which creates a sense that creative nonfiction needs to be patrolled or controlled in some way. Readers cannot trust the people who create creative nonfiction—the personas they present on the page are fictitious and self-serving, their methods are suspicious, and now even the good writers can't be trusted not to be deceived by their own subjects. When a reader picks up a book from a creative nonfiction shelf, he is waiting and looking for the moment when that book will violate his trust. The past decade's controversies have created a genre that is entirely defined by the trust between writer and reader, which leaves no room in the genre to make art, as we can see in the current conversations about the genre. Over the last three years, the conference for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) has hosted many panels and presentations focused on the controversies inherent in creative nonfiction. Panels have included "Nothing but the Truth: Perspectives on

Creative Nonfiction in the Classroom and Beyond” which questioned whether the “slippery nature of perception affords writers infinite liberties”, “What’s Normal in Nonfiction?” which explored the role and ethics of the nonfiction writer, and “Stranger Than Fiction: The Choice Between Fiction and Nonfiction” which pondered the debatable difference between the genres (“Conference Archives”). In 2013, a panel called “Why Genre Matters” questioned, as Slater had years before, whether labeling literature has any practical value, though most of these panelists disagreed with Slater’s answer that such labels are limiting. Many of the panels focused on what teachers should be teaching their students about creative nonfiction in the wake of so many scandals. How should readers approach a genre that had burned them so many times in past?

These controversies and the critical conversations they sparked characterize current climate in literary circles—intolerance toward emotional truth and an inclination toward experiential truth and facts. This obsession with fact flourished for more than a decade, coloring every literary work or discussion. In the past few years, however, some nonfiction writers, including John D’Agata, have begun to deliberately retaliate against this trend, pushing back against the popular infatuation with facts, and their work, as one might expect, has been met with significant opposition.

## Chapter Four: John D'Agata and the Art of Creative Nonfiction

The first decade of the new millennium was riddled with literary scandals of varying degrees of culpability, but a growing obsession with fact exacerbated those scandals that it didn't cause. Towards the end of the decade, however, some authors began to fight back against this love of the factual and verifiable—none more successfully or intriguingly than John D'Agata.

In the midst of the James Frey controversy, D'Agata, whose liberal nonfiction ethics have made him the topic of his own fact vs. fiction debates, did not defend Frey's actions but did say, "When Oprah starts calling people out and scolding them on national television, I think we've come to a point where it's impossible to have an intelligent and reasoned conversation about the issue of veracity in the genre" (Levin). In an effort to start an "intelligent and reasoned conversation" (or perhaps to do just the opposite—to subvert the need for one) D'Agata offered his 2010 book *About a Mountain*, which simultaneously tells an engaging and true story, subtly teaches readers what creative nonfiction really is, and mocks those readers and critics who would have all writing fit neatly into a prescribed genre label. Unlike Slater's *Lying*, *About a Mountain* is not designed to frustrate or confuse the reader, though many of D'Agata's choices might very well have that effect. It is designed to help the reader see the inanity of the veracity debate altogether.

### Composites and Compressions in the Story

*About a Mountain* is, on one level, the story of the federal government's attempt to use Yucca Mountain in Nevada as a potentially catastrophic nuclear waste storage facility. On another level, it is the story of the summer D'Agata spent helping his mother move to Las Vegas

and ponder whether or not to live there himself as well. And on yet another level, it is the story of the suicide of a Las Vegas teenager named Levi Presley. Using a braided form, D'Agata tells these three stories and uses them to inform and comment on one another. For example, the central story of *About a Mountain*, the account of the Senate hearings on Yucca Mountain, is closely intertwined with the timeline leading up to Levi Presley's suicide. D'Agata places a heavy emphasis on the day the Senate approved Yucca Mountain as a nuclear waste repository, and then, sporadically and almost spontaneously, he explains to the reader that a young man in Las Vegas named Levi Presley jumped off the Stratosphere Hotel on the same day. This is a moment when all three strands of his narrative—Yucca Mountain and the danger of nuclear waste, finding a home in Las Vegas, and Levi Presley's suicide—meet. After describing watching Senator Harry Reid's fight against the Yucca Mountain Project on CNN at a local bar, D'Agata continues:

We cheered [at the TV].

For what, it was hard to say.

By then, the afternoon had begun to stretch thin across the valley, and before the sun would disappear I would decide to live in Las Vegas.

The winds from the south were blowing palls of white dust, the stock market was low, unemployment rates high, the moon only showing half of itself, and Mars and Jupiter aligned, which isn't particularly rare, and so there is no explanation for the confluence that night of the Senate vote on Yucca Mountain and the death of a boy who jumped from the tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, a 1,149 foot-high tower in the center of the brown desert valley. (42)

D'Agata uses the juxtaposition of these two tragic events to reinforce and inform one another throughout the book—this was a day equally as devastating for Nevada as it was for the family and friends of Levi Presley. This comparative connection becomes the driving force of the book, giving it both context and emotional weight. It is the heart, perhaps even the emotional truth, of the story D'Agata is trying to tell, but it is also one of the dozens of issues readers and critics questioned as D'Agata's ethics were criticized. The problem with the coincidental confluence

that anchors *About a Mountain* is that it isn't a confluence at all—in reality, the Senate vote and Levi's suicide occurred three days apart.

Conflating the dates of the Senate vote and Levi's suicide doesn't appear necessary or justifiable—the two storylines could have been used together even if the few days between them had been briefly acknowledged in the text (for example, “and there is no explanation for the confluence *that week* of the Senate vote on Yucca Mountain and the death of a boy,”) and the effect would not necessarily have been less powerful. Though this is one of the most dramatic of the changes made, this is just one example of the liberties D'Agata took and which critics and readers spoke out against; *About a Mountain* is filled with changes of names, landmarks, order, and other low-stakes issues that fall into this same confusing category.

Numbers seem to have very little importance to D'Agata—in addition to changing dates in the book, he also massages other verifiable facts and figures, such as the total number of deaths that occurred in Las Vegas on the day of Levi's suicide. In the book, he writes, “On the day that Levi Presley died, five others died from two types of cancer, four from heart attacks, three because of strokes. It was a day of two suicides by gunshot as well. The day of yet another suicide from hanging” (D'Agata 43). In fact, there were eight deaths by heart attack that day. When questioned about the rationale behind this change, D'Agata said, “I like the effect of these numbers scaling down in the sentence from five to four to three, etc... I'm trying to write something that's interesting to read...” (D'Agata and Fingal 17).

For many readers, these kinds of justifications were anything but satisfactory. D'Agata's ambiguous goal of creating something “interesting” did little to help them understand why he had made the specific changes he had made, particularly the conscious manipulation of facts and numbers but also changes that creative nonfiction readers and critics had seen before, like

conflating events and creating composite characters to streamline the story. By the time *About a Mountain* was published, controversy over these types of modifications was a common theme of the creative nonfiction genre, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

What is unique about D'Agata is that unlike Gornick, who intentionally did not call attention to her changes, and unlike Slater, who frequently calls attention to the possibility of changes but never confirms, D'Agata identifies every instance of each kind of change in a lengthy notes section at the end of his book. This, in turn, is unlike Karr and Wolff, who vaguely reference inaccuracies in their prefaces. While Gornick counts on her readers to trust her and choose to be ignorant of any revisions, D'Agata spells out the difference between the facts he used and the facts as they really happened, encouraging the reader to be both aware and informed of them, but only when the book has come to a close.

### **Informing a Reader through Notes**

The notes section in *About a Mountain* serves both to provide sources and to explain adjustments D'Agata has made to the facts, which are many and varied. Some entered notes simply offer the source of a quote or figure, while others casually acknowledge significant manipulation of the facts. D'Agata's choice to include these notes functions much the same as the authors' notes discussed in Chapter Two. Those authors' notes reach out in hopes of creating an informed readership; they acknowledge disparity between their work and literal reality, and then ask the reader to continue reading anyway. There are two key differences between the authors' notes previously analyzed and the notes section in D'Agata's book: prefatory notes immediately informs the reader, while the notes section follows the text and allows for a period

of willful ignorance, and two, the prefatory notes do not point out the specific changes that have been made, while D'Agata lays it all out on the table—albeit “after the fact.”

In contrast to the informed and willfully ignorant reader described by Vivian Gornick, D'Agata's ideal readership seems to be informed and willfully apathetic—he wants readers who are aware of changes, but not care about them.

If authors' notes are a nod in the direction of full disclosure that allows readers to acknowledge changes but sidestep the particulars, D'Agata's notes appendix is a pointing finger that asks readers to acknowledge specific factual changes. For example, when D'Agata's note states, “I should clarify here that I'm conflating the date of the Yucca debate and the suicide that occurred at the Stratosphere Hotel. In reality, these events were separated by three days” (D'Agata 209). the nonchalance with which D'Agata corrects himself is meaningful here, but what's more significant in this note is that D'Agata felt that he “*should* clarify” the dates in an appendix but not in the text itself, implying that he recognizes the importance of the facts but values their literary effect more highly. Additionally, D'Agata specifically calls attention to the difference between the book he has written and the events as they actually transpired when he uses the phrase “in reality.” The story of *About a Mountain* is not reality, despite being labeled as nonfiction by his publishers, and it seems D'Agata never intended for it to be reality. This note in particular (and the notes section in general) reveals D'Agata's goals for his writing and the qualities he values in a reader.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its candor, the notes section was met with mixed reviews. *New York Times* reviewer Charles Bock did not accept the notes as a solution to the problems that accompany creative changes to a true story, writing, “To me, the problem isn't solved by a footnote saying, Hey, this part of my gorgeous prose is a lie, but since I admit it, you can still

trust me. Rather, it damages the moral authority of D'Agata's voice, which is his narrative's main engine. It causes me to question...other important scenes" (Bock). Many other readers and critics echoed Bock's distrust in publications like *The Washington Post*, *Brevity*, and *The Rumpus* (the *New Yorker's* book blog), but in the book D'Agata seems unconcerned with distrust or questioning. In fact, the inclusion of the notes section appears to be a message to readers that he is more interested in telling an artful and engaging story than he is in tricking them—otherwise, why include the real facts at all? D'Agata's primary concern is the story, not the reader's trust. When asked, "Aren't you worried about your credibility with the reader?" D'Agata answered, "Not really... The readers who care about interesting sentences and the metaphorical effect that the accumulation of those sentences achieve will probably forgive me" (D'Agata and Fingal 17). In other words, D'Agata is writing specifically for an informed audience that values the effect of careful changes to the facts, thus creating emotional truth, more than strict fidelity to the facts. D'Agata is not concerned about the readers' trust or his own moral authority, as Bock suggested he should be. In writing specifically for this audience, D'Agata is discounting the value of reader trust—creating a narrative that can be trusted is not his goal, as he notes. Though Gornick, Slater, and D'Agata differ in the extent to which they inform their readers, they all seem to write for a reader who values the effect of literature more than the details.

It's important to note that though some critics contested D'Agata's notes section, other critics were among those readers who "probably forgave" him. The *Los Angeles Times* review says of the notes section debate,

...the offhand genius of *About a Mountain* is that it renders the whole issue moot. By the time we get to D'Agata's admission, we've already given ourselves over to his subtle brand of experimentalism—a fluid mix of reportage and conjecture—with the personal, political and philosophical interwoven like overlapping roller coaster tracks. (Ulin)

This is largely true; the story is irresistibly engaging long before the notes section, but perhaps along with the “personal, political and philosophical,” D’Agata has also woven into the text and appendix a fourth theme—his nonfiction values system. This developing outlining of values—not altogether unlike Slater’s work a decade before—is yet another way that D’Agata informs his readers and is equally as important as the notes section though considerably more subtle, thus requiring more in depth examination. Thus, Maureen Corrigan’s idea that all memoirs teach their readers how to read them is not only true for autobiography but also for all other works of creative nonfiction. As the next section will prove, by subtly weaving his ethics and values into the braided story of *About a Mountain*, D’Agata teaches readers how to read his work as well.

### **Informing Readers Through Text**

Evidence of D’Agata’s beliefs are scattered throughout the book—for example, there are frequent moments when D’Agata seems to be showing the reader that facts aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. When describing the Senate’s vote on the fate of Yucca Mountain, D’Agata mentions the amount of time the senators spent discussing whether the term ought be pronounced “*pyro*-processing or *pyra*-processing, and whether an aide in the chamber that day would be willing to check that out” (D’Agata 37). This example, in addition to making the reader question the efficiency of the democratic system, shows that sometimes the facts get in the way and slow down the real story. However, less than a page later, D’Agata explains that the senators spent hours discussing the routes that nuclear waste would have to travel to reach Yucca Mountain, only to then have one senator stand and clarify that no official routes had been determined—meaning that their map was wholly inaccurate and the discussion had been a waste of time (D’Agata 38). In this second example, the facts, or lack of them, seem to be hugely important to

the progress of the story. This pattern of presenting an example in which facts are a hindrance followed by one in which facts are crucial is repeated many times throughout the book, and these showcase D'Agata's playful, flippant attitude toward facts.

D'Agata also gives the reader myriad examples in which facts are neither absolute nor trustworthy. He describes a visit to the Yucca Mountain Information Center, where he hears a Department of Energy representative telling a group of children that Yucca Mountain would be sealed for 10,000 years because that is how long it takes for "all of the radioactive elements [to become] safe"—the half-life. D'Agata immediately follows this with research that shows "most environmental scientists don't consider radioactive materials 'safe' until they've been dormant for ten times their projected half-life" (64). This instance illustrates the conflicted opinions on nuclear waste because that information is crucial to the reader's understanding of the Yucca Mountain storyline, but the example also subtly shows the reader that facts are not absolute, and there is always more that we do not and perhaps cannot know.

D'Agata's visit to the Yucca Mountain Information Center not only teaches the reader that a fact is rarely absolutely true, but also that facts can be denied or ignored. Later on in the book, D'Agata suggests that the Department of Energy repeated their studies of Yucca until they got the results they wanted, and at one point he quotes the former Research Director for the Yucca Mountain Project as saying, "It was apparent that the original standards for the repository... couldn't legitimately be met through the science we were doing. So the Department of Energy basically changed the rules of its science in order to make it easier for the mountain to comply" (55). Thus, even facts proven by science are not safe from manipulation, though readers have been taught to trust the results of such studies. To even further emphasize the naiveté of such trust, D'Agata folds this lesson in on itself later in the notes section when he explains that

though he represents this as a single visit to the Yucca Mountain Information Center, in fact he visited over the course of several afternoons—a composite event much like Gornick’s walks with her mother.

As they begin to understand how many times this story has been manipulated, readers are left with a startling realization: facts are not infallible just because they’ve been printed. The combined effect of the notes section, which highlights D’Agata’s personal disrespect for facts, and the text, which persuades the reader through examples beyond D’Agata that facts are not to be trusted blindly, informs readers about how to make meaning in *About a Mountain* and in creative nonfiction as a whole.

D’Agata reveals his beliefs about creative nonfiction on every page of *About a Mountain*, but one particularly telling example is sneaked into a discussion of the challenges associated with nuclear waste’s overwhelming half-life. D’Agata recounts a series of meetings arranged to conduct the convoluted process of creating a physical sign to warn future humans of the lethal waste housed in Yucca Mountain that would be readable for 10,000 years. Scientists and government committees considered and rejected most common materials because they wouldn’t last long enough, and linguists and cognitive scientists debated about what the sign should actually communicate. They couldn’t anticipate the changes language would undergo in 10,000 years, so it would have to be a pictogram or, as one scientist suggested, a puzzle. That scientist said, “We all interpret differently, but the point is that the more complex we make our message, the more likely it is that a future civilization will be able to decipher it correctly, because a complex message will leave less room for vagueness and more opportunities to countercheck our intentions” (121).

Under this reasoning, the more complicated message is clearer because it requires readers to engage with it and actively work out what it means. Just as this makes sense for a sign on a nuclear waste site, it makes sense for creative nonfiction. In fact, it seems to justify the genre's contradictions as a whole—the things that are so maddening and convoluted about creative nonfiction are exactly where it gains its power to affect readers because they have to think about those moments, and in pondering them, readers have the chance to uncover a greater depth of emotional truth.

As D'Agata explains in *About a Mountain*, all facts—not just personal ones-- are fallible. They can be manipulated, denied, and interpreted differently, and though stories and essays are born from facts, they do not depend on facts. This is the difference between the situation and the story, the emotional and experiential truth: No matter the names we give the components, the relationship between the facts and the story that arises from them is complicated, and it is this complication that gives creative nonfiction its unique influence on readers. Because readers must work with the words on the page to find the story and because determining the difference between the facts and the story gives the reader the chance to understand different, larger truths, creative nonfiction offers a clearer message than just the facts ever could. As D'Agata later explained, “My job is not to recreate a world that already exists, holding up a mirror to the readers' experience in hopes that it rings true. If a mirror were a sufficient means of handling human experience, I doubt that our species would have invented literature” (D'Agata and Fingal 22).

Complication is essential to creative nonfiction's goal of representing emotional truth because the human experience is complicated, and through subtle examples embedded in an already compelling story, D'Agata teaches his readers to embrace this complication as a means

of communicating emotional truth. This communication depends on reader engagement, just like the Yucca Mountain warning sign, and engagement is what defines an informed and willfully ignorant reader.

### **Teaching Readers through Pranks**

D'Agata's feelings about genre restrictions, while always well expressed, are not always so polite. In fact, he has a history of pulling pranks on the literary world that cause certain readers and critics to question both his honesty and their own understanding of genre. For example, in *About a Mountain*, the presence and contents of the notes section are certainly a kind of prank for those who take citations very seriously—the line “the wide-eyed, pale, and hairless ghosts of Norway's exposed children” (used in a metaphor) is tagged with the unhelpful note, “I learned about [Norwegian] superstitions...on a dog-sledding expedition I took outside Oslo during November 2002. We were actually looking for trolls” (D'Agata 234). Another note explains that the information in that paragraph comes “from a variety of sources, many of them dubious. The point here is only to illustrate their abundance” (228). Still another identifies the statistician from whom D'Agata cited the odds of winning the lottery, and he adds, “He also estimates that the chances of being kidnapped by radioactive monkeys which then attempt to convert you to Buddhism are approximately 1 in 46 million” (216). These examples, while surely included partly for comic effect, are also a sarcastic jab at readers whose interest in veracity led them to read the notes closely.

*About a Mountain's* very structure could be considered a meaningful prank on journalism and its dedication to truth. The book is broken up into sections labeled with the questions of the reporter's classic 5 W's and H: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How? These questions are

designed to help investigators uncover “the whole truth”, but D’Agata capriciously bends truth to fit his whims throughout his book. The content of each section only loosely corresponds to its heading (if it corresponds at all), so the use of the journalistic heuristic seems to lend nothing to the text except a caustic prank. In the text itself, D’Agata teaches the reader through examples how to read and understand his work, but in the notes appendix and the section headings, he teaches through irreverence.

The most significant and extensive prank D’Agata has pulled on readers and critics is *Lifespan of a Fact*, the innovative and much-discussed 2012 chronicle of the back-and-forth dialogue between himself and his fact-checker Jim Fingal. *About a Mountain* began in the early 2000s as an essay that *Harper’s* rejected due to its many inaccuracies, but *The Believer* accepted the manuscript on the condition that their fact-checker verify the text. Jim Fingal, a recently hired first-time fact-checker, was assigned to the essay, and he quickly learned how difficult both the essay and its author could be. *Lifespan of a Fact* is the supposedly record of the resulting seven years of correspondence between author and fact-checker. The book presents D’Agata’s original essay surrounded by Fingal’s meticulous and thorough notes—the confirmed facts in black, the disputes and resulting conversations with D’Agata in red (the layout is reminiscent of the Bible—a prankish allusion in and of itself). Some of the notes point out legitimate and potentially unethical behavior, like when Fingal tries to confirm that Levi Presley fell for nine seconds after he jumped off the Stratosphere. Fingal discovers that the coroner’s report says Levi fell for eight seconds, and D’Agata replies:

John: Yeah, I fudged that. It doesn’t seem like it should be a big deal, though. It’s only a second. And I needed him to fall for nine seconds rather than eight in order to help make some of the later themes in the essay work.

Jim: John, changing details about Tabasco sauce bottles and thermometers is one thing, but it seems a tad unethical to fiddle with details that relate directly to this kid’s death. In

my book, it just seems wrong, especially since the coroner clearly states that Presley's fall only took eight seconds.

John: I don't think it's unethical... Do you think I'd just change this willy-nilly to suit some literary trick I wanted to pull off? His parents [told me about] these nine seconds... (D'Agata and Fingal 19).

Notes like this allowed D'Agata to confront some of the discontent readers felt about *About a Mountain*, which was published a full two years before *Lifespan*. Then, some critics (like Bock) believed that altering the details of a teenage suicide was disrespectful, and here D'Agata is able to both defend himself and mock on their criticism while also making another piece of literary nonfiction that confounds readers.

Other parts of *Lifespan* are cutting and snarky in tone, like when D'Agata writes that his mother has been beading jewelry for extra income. Fingal comments, "Since he won't give me his mother's contact information, I can't confirm this, or whether or not she really has a cat, and a need for 'some extra cash.' Though she must be quite the artist to be able to sell her handicrafts for extra cash." To which D'Agata replies, "Tread very carefully, asshole" (42).

This kind of salty banter is a prank in and of itself. Not only does the content of these interactions paint nitpicking nonfiction purists in a bad light, but it also shows yet again how willing D'Agata is to manipulate history to suit his purposes. At the beginning of *Lifespan*, Fingal introduces himself and his fact-checking assignment, and D'Agata responds, "'I think maybe there's some sort of miscommunication, because the 'article,' as you call it, is fine. It shouldn't need a fact-checker.... I have taken some liberties ... here and there, but none of them are harmful" (15).

None of D'Agata's liberties seem harmful, unlike Gornick's, Frey's, Albert's, Daisey's, or Zeitoun's. As the book progresses, both men's voices become more sarcastic and irascible. Jim nitpicks inconsequential details just for the sake of "accuracy," like when he checks the time

of Levi Presley's death, which D'Agata places at 6:01. Fingal writes, "Temporal Inaccuracy: The rounding here of the time to '6:01 p.m.' is inaccurate, since it happened at 6:01:43 p.m., which is closer to 6:02 than it is to 6:01" (24). Soon, D'Agata is responding with comments like "Jim, seriously. Chill the fuck out" (66). Escalation like this is a hallmark of satire; this is yet another prank to show the absurdity of the need for discussions about truth in creative nonfiction.

These pranks all have the common purpose of teaching readers to "chill out", to consider the value of the emotional truth over the experiential. D'Agata explains this viewpoint to Fingal when he writes, "I'm tired of this genre being terrorized by an unsophisticated reading public that's afraid of accidentally venturing into terrain that can't be footnoted and verified by 17 different sources" (D'Agata and Fingal 22). The criticism of the "unsophisticated reading public"—perhaps we could also call it an uninformed reading public—is a clear reference to the previous decade's many literary scandals, which it seems D'Agata considered unfounded. By playing tricks on his readers, D'Agata is able to mock and admonish those critics who "terrorized" the writers in those earlier scandals.

### **The Limits of Labels**

Throughout *Lifespan*, Jim Fingal becomes increasingly frustrated by D'Agata's slippery ethics and eventually comments, "Note to self: John is not a journalist. Also not a nonfiction writer. He is however, a writer of journalistic-ish texts that are not necessarily fiction. Got it" (74). Though Fingal intended this rejoinder to be snarky and sarcastic, D'Agata would likely agree wholeheartedly with that description. John D'Agata is famous for his extreme views on creative nonfiction and his distaste for the narrowness of the genre. Despite the fact that he is the

director of the top-ranked nonfiction MFA program in the country (“2012 MFA Rankings”), he finds the name “nonfiction” inadequate for the field, as he explains:

Veracity is only an issue because of some readers' insistence on calling the genre nonfiction, which strips the form of its chance to be art... Nonfiction basically means not art, since fiction is a word that's derived from the Latin *fictio*, which means 'to form, to shape, to arrange,' which is a pretty fundamental activity of art. So by calling something nonfiction you are saddling the genre with a label that means it's incapable of doing what art does, and this of course sets up expectations in readers' minds for what they should and should not expect from such a text. It makes sense that readers would demand from nonfiction the same kind of factual accuracy that they experience in journalism, because after you've said the genre is unable to do any arranging or forming or shaping, reportage is pretty much all that's available to it." (qtd. in Levin)

For D’Agata, labels limit what a piece of writing is able to do and prescribe how the reader will interact with the text. In the terms of the informed/ignorant dichotomy, he wants an entirely ignorant—but not unsophisticated—audience—not an audience that understands the conventions of the genre but chooses to interact with the text as if they don’t, as Gornick seems to suggest, but an audience that is completely ignorant about the genre before they experience the literary work of the text. Then, as the piece unfolds, D’Agata will inform them on a need-to-know basis (i.e. the notes section).

D’Agata argues that ideally, genre labels would be eliminated to give writers the freedom to “essay”, which originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a verb and meant “to practise (an art, etc.) by way of trial” (“essay, v.”) In other words, essays are meant to be experimental and trying to do new things. D’Agata explored this idea in his 2009 anthology *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, which includes many pieces previously catalogued as poetry or fiction and which seeks to free the essay form from its historical obligation to report facts. This obligation, along with the creative nonfiction label, limits the writing’s ability to be artistic and, indeed, to be art. In a prefatory note to the readers, he writes, “Do we read nonfiction in order to receive information,

or do we read it to experience art? It's not very clear sometimes. So this is a book that will try to offer the reader a clear objective: I am here in search of art" (*Lost Origins* 3).

This seems to be D'Agata's objective in all his writing—to find and create art. Anything that threatens to obscure the art he is creating can simply be changed. If the audience is hung up on the label, then do away with the label. If the facts of the experience don't serve the artistic purpose, then massage them. This is an obvious reaction to a decade of limitations, brought on by emotional reader responses, current events, and moments of literary disgrace. In *Lifespan*, D'Agata summarily dismisses any doubt that he has the right as the writer to make changes:

Jim: You're presenting this as fact. And I, the hypothetical reader, am putting my trust in you to give me the straight dope, or at least to make some effort to warn me whenever you're saying something that is patently untrue, even if it's untrue for "artistic reasons." I mean, what exactly gives you the authority to introduce half-baked legend as fact and sidestep questions of facticity?  
John: It's called art, dickhead. (106)

For D'Agata, art is the end goal, and as such, it is the top priority. These ethics have made D'Agata as much a source of scandal as any of the other controversies discussed in the previous chapters, but they have also allowed him to try the boundaries of creative nonfiction and push back against the fixation on facts that inhibits many creative nonfiction writers. As long as the current atmosphere makes it impossible, as he said, to have "an intelligent and reasoned conversation about the issue of veracity in the genre," cleverly hidden instructions and sarcastic pranks will have to suffice.

## Conclusion

After studying the past decade's numerous literary scandals and what they can teach us about the relationship between creative nonfiction writers and their readers, several things have become clear and several things have not.

This thesis began with the goal of answering three main questions: What is acceptable in creative nonfiction? What role do readers play in the process of making meaning and holding authors accountable to a somewhat nebulous set of standards? What responsibilities does a writer have when writing creative nonfiction?

What should be acceptable in creative nonfiction is any honest attempt to convey the emotional truth of an experience. When readers understand the difference and value emotional over experiential, they willingly grant writers the tools needed to tell their story. By looking at how readers received controversial creative nonfiction work, we have seen that being informed about the goal of nonfiction (to relay the emotional truth of an experience) and the tools used in accomplishing that goal (timeline compression, composite events and characters) is essential for the reader to avoid feeling duped, but this information needs to be balanced with willful ignorance to allow the reader to fully participate in making meaning in creative nonfiction.

Writers accept the responsibility of examining their experiences and accurately and interestingly conveying the emotional truth of those situations. As Vivian Gornick said, "What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand" ("A memoirist defends"). Perhaps, as D'Agata has shown, writers also have a responsibility, or at least the opportunity, to push on the boundaries of the genre and of their readers' expectations and more firmly establish creative

nonfiction as a facet of literature. With this responsibility, however, comes an obligation to instruct readers on how to read the piece—Vivian Gornick’s claim that an author’s note would have precluded her readers’ willful ignorance is incorrect. The choice that readers make to be ignorant is at worst unaffected by an author’s instructions and is at best improved by a clear explanation of an author’s understanding of creative nonfiction.

There are, of course, many areas of creative nonfiction that can be studied further. The guiding questions I have here applied to the first decade of the new millennium can and should be applied to a larger timeline, especially to the 1960s and 1970s because of the development of the New Journalism. The creation of the more expansive and inclusive creative nonfiction genre occurred over decades, and this time needs to be mapped out to better understand how this genre developed.

It is likely that in applying these questions to a larger timeline, the answers I have suggested here will change somewhat. In this thesis, I have attempted to outline the creative nonfiction-as-literature side of the debate, but these questions about acceptability and responsibility in creative nonfiction can equally be applied to the work of writers who take the creative nonfiction-as-journalism position. Naturally, these writers and critics will disagree with my explanation of an informed and ignorant reader, but they will have their own answers to questions about the writer/reader relationship. In order to fully explore the contradictions of creative nonfiction, this opposing side must be studied in the same terms that I have used here.

This research could also be helpful in exploring recent changes in high school language arts curriculum. High school students are now required to read an increasing amount of nonfiction writing as a result of the Common Core standardized curriculum, and this research suggests that these students need to be taught to read creative nonfiction differently from

journalism or historical nonfiction (English Language Arts Standards). As I have shown, readers bring their own emotional baggage to the table when they approach a work of creative nonfiction, and the new emphasis on creative nonfiction in high schools provides an opportunity to preclude some of that baggage. This thesis has revealed that readers need to be taught, whether by teachers or authors or both, about the conflicted space that creative nonfiction inhabits in literature. If students approach creative nonfiction with an expectation that the writing is intended to be historically and experientially true, they will find themselves in the same position as many of the disgruntled readers whose responses I have analyzed in this thesis. In short, the primary finding of this thesis has been the importance of the relationship between the writer and the reader in teaching the reader how to make meaning out of creative nonfiction, and the changing standards in public education provide an opportunity to teach readers early how to be both informed and willfully ignorant readers, so this opportunity is ripe for further exploration.

Continued research of this type is essential to the further establishment of creative nonfiction as a genre. Readers need to be familiar with the genre in general before they can become familiar with the intricacies and contradictions that plague it, and this kind of familiarity will only come with continued conversation. Subjects like the New Journalism and the nonfiction novel have received critical conversation for decades, but it is now necessary to discuss these issues as part of the larger creative nonfiction genre. Through this kind of discussion, the breadth, depth, and great potential of creative nonfiction will become clearer, and the genre will increasingly receive recognition as a facet of literature.

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