

Creative nonfiction



Creative nonfiction is a broad category of texts that describe real people, events and experiences, but use literary devices such as figurative language, detailed description, techniques of characterisation, a strong narrative voice that is integral to the story, and a narrative structure that creates a reading experience similar to that of reading a novel.

In fact, all the nonfiction genres discussed in this chapter can be considered types of creative nonfiction, depending on the writer's approach and use of language. However, some book-length nonfiction genres don't quite match the usual conventions for autobiography, memoir and biography, and can be very creative in their use of narrative voice and structure.

Travel writing, for example, is a form of memoir in which the focus is as much on the places being lived in and/or travelled through as on the writer's personal experiences. *In Patagonia* (1977), by English novelist and journalist Bruce Chatwin, and *Tracks* (1980), by Australian writer Robyn Davidson, are two examples of travel writing that include historical background, cultural context and detailed descriptions of landscapes in addition to the author's experiences.

Journalistic nonfiction (or literary journalism) draws on journalistic techniques including conducting interviews, carrying out archival research, attending events such as criminal trials and visiting key locations. While the accurate reporting of facts is essential, the genre also allows for an element of subjectivity through the writer placing themselves in the story and expressing their own responses and opinions. Other elements characteristic of literary fiction that can be incorporated in literary journalism are dialogue (much of which might, necessarily, be invented), detailed and evocative descriptions, narrative tension, symbolism and irony. The writer might also, perhaps for legal reasons, disguise the identity of some individuals by altering names, combining a few individuals who play minor roles in the story into one character or even basing several characters on one individual.

An important movement that shaped and developed this genre was **New Journalism**, which emerged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s: writers such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe published both fiction and nonfiction, and in various ways blurred the distinctions between the two.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), an account of the 1959 murders in Holcomb, Kansas, of four members of the Clutter family and the two men who committed them, is an early and defining text in the New Journalism movement. Capote spent many hours researching the story, interviewing residents, investigators and the two murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Unlike many works in this genre, Capote's 'nonfiction novel' (a term he used for it) avoids using the first person and presents information in a seemingly objective manner through a third-person narrative voice. Yet Capote shapes and manipulates the reader's reactions in numerous ways. He interweaves the stories of the victims and investigators with those of Smith and Hickock, moving between different times and locations to build tension even when the eventual outcome – the arrest, trial and execution of the murderers – is known. And there are many subjective elements, including Capote's representation of the thoughts and feelings of individuals at times when he had no access to them, and the depiction of individuals in ways that subtly invite, or discourage, the reader's sympathy.

This is particularly true of Capote's portrayal of Smith and Hickock. Conversations, thoughts and feelings are related with a degree of detail that owes as much to the novelist's imagination as to the interviews Capote conducted. Here, he relates an exchange between Smith and Hickock, on the run and anxious about their identities being discovered.

Perry had gone too far. He went further: 'Floyd – is that the name?' A bit below the belt, but then Dick deserved it, his confidence was like a kite that needed reeling in. Nevertheless, Perry observed with some misgiving the symptoms of fury rearranging Dick's expression: jaw, lips, the whole face slackened; saliva bubbles appeared at the corners of his mouth. Well, if it came to a fight, Perry could defend himself.

Indeed, there have been accusations that Capote invented scenes, distorting reality in order to achieve effects more like those of fiction: suspense, pity, empathy, anticipation, denouement and resolution.

In Cold Blood also belongs to the **true crime** genre. Capote's interest in gaining a psychological understanding of criminals, victims and investigators, and his detailed, evocative descriptions of times and places, are common to many subsequent texts in this genre, including Australian authors Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man* (2008) and Helen Garner's *This House of Grief* (2014), both of which present unflinching accounts of horrific crimes in complex, nuanced ways.

Unlike Capote, though, both Hooper and Garner place themselves in the narrative, making their own observations and responses part of the wider story. In this way, the inevitable subjective elements of such a narrative, and the impossibility of capturing every detail or showing every perspective, become integral to the text, rather than being glossed over or hidden. As Garner reflects in her essay 'The Fate of *The First Stone*', there will always be gaps in a writer's attempt to tell a true story, but these are not, by themselves, reasons for rejecting the story.

These are the stories that need to be *told*, not swept away like so much debris, or hidden from sight. My attempt to understand this story was frustrated. My version of it is full of holes. But I hope that these holes might, after all, have a use; that through them might pass air and light ...



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