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# Interview with Lee Gutkind

by Joyce Stoffers

In the fall of 1994, I attended the Oklahoma Fall Arts Institute at Quartz Mountain where Lee Gutkind, founder and editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, was teaching an intense workshop on writing nonfiction. His wealth of knowledge and experience were combined with a teaching style radiating an exuberant warmth. I knew I had to ask him to share his ideas with the *Westview* audience, and allow us to run one of his pieces so our readers could see him putting those ideas into action. Fortunately, he graciously accepted. Lee would allow *Westview* to re-publish his Tom Mix piece for our Heroes and Heroines issue, plus he'd grant me an interview.

In December, 1995, I sent Lee the interview questions, and in January of 1996 he sent me a letter stating the following: "When I looked at your questions earlier this week, I was struck by the fact that I had already answered them in my book that will be published this spring by Chicago Review Press, entitled *Creative Nonfiction: How To Write It and Live It*." I immediately panicked and assumed Lee meant that now we wouldn't be able to run the interview; but I continued reading frantic with curiosity about the hefty weight of a stack of paper directly under the letter. The papers turned out to be close to seventy pages of then-unpublished manuscript, on which Lee had painstakingly marked in yellow those sections answering my questions. The following is the result of those literally illuminated and particularly illuminating portions.

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**STOFFERS:** What is your background in writing, and how did you get interested in creative nonfiction?

**GUTKIND:** I launched my freelance writing career working for local newspapers and magazines. First, I wrote historically-oriented articles on topics such as the origin of Mother's Day, and then I began hanging around and exploring in the backwoods, befriending mountain people—a one-armed blacksmith, a championship snake-sacker (a guy who tossed dozens of writhing rattlesnakes, barehanded, into a canvas bag at breakneck speed), a cooper (barrel-maker), a woman whose husband bartered away for her teeth, and I wrote articles and essays about all of the people I met and the experiences we shared.

The more I wrote, the more I came to understand and appreciate the value and importance of personal experience in the writing process. When I first started freelancing, I devoted most of my research time to reading other people's work in the library or conducting interviews of experts in the subjects about which I was writing.

The library research was and is necessary: you need to familiarize yourself with the basic facts of any subject you are writing about. And the interviewing was often essential. But I always felt that a third dimension was missing in the essays and articles I was writing—and in most of the nonfiction I was reading in books, newspapers and magazines.

There were limits to a writer's ability to capture the essence of a subject by relying only on books and second-hand reports, no matter how vivid. What was missing was the special insight provided by the third dimension of the writer's research, which is personal experience.

How can you write accurately and intimately about people, places and things, I asked myself, unless you come as close as humanly possible to participating in the worlds you are attempting to describe? That revelation led to my decision to become a clown for a day for Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus.

I will never forget the fun that afternoon, dressing in clown costume, making-up in "clown alley," and then performing under the "big top," doing back flips, somersaults, hula-dancing, momentarily losing all of my inhibitions.

I will never forget the feeling of exhilaration and satisfaction, not only because I was a clown, but also because I knew in the back of my mind that I could become something else tomorrow—and then something very different in the weeks and months thereafter.

I suddenly realized how fortunate I was. How many other people had the rare opportunity to live in someone else's shoes—to try out life in another milieu and to pick and choose their experiences? Within the obvious limits of health, safety, good taste, etc., I could become literally anything that appealed to me, and when I got tired of it, become something else.

And then in the privacy of my own office, I was presented with the challenge to recreate in words the experiences I had just lived for thousands—or millions—of readers. I remember thinking: "I can't imagine ever doing anything else! I can't imagine ever *wanting* to do anything else!"

Since then, I have labored as a rodeo wrangler, scrubbed with heart and liver transplant surgeons, traveled with a crew of National League baseball umpires, acted in summer stock theater, flew rescue missions with emergency trauma teams, observed behind-the-scenes at a children's hospital, endured desert survival training, floated in the Goodyear blimp, bicycled Ireland, worked with zoo veterinarians on lions, gorillas, elephants and wandered the U.S. on a motorcycle—all in the line of duty. But becoming a clown was a special breakthrough.

From that moment on, this was how I wrote my articles and essays, by *embracing all three dimensions of the writing experience*: I researched in the library, I interviewed the experts, and then I plunged into a world I was attempting to capture in words and became intimately involved for a day, a month or a year until I could understand it—feel it—from the inside out.

**STOFFERS:** This brings us to the role of “immersion journalism” in your work. Would you comment some more on this topic?

**GUTKIND:** Immersion journalists, like Jeanne Marie Laskas, are take-charge guys who force fact and experience to collide. In immersion journalism, the important distinction is to try to understand that readers primarily want to know what you see and hear, based upon your observations.

The concept behind the immersion is to blend-in, to immerse yourself so deeply and with such subtlety in a place or as part of an experience that you will soon be part of the passing parade—a fixture—a fly on the wall. You make yourself so visible that you become invisible. Like the living room sofa; it has been in the same place for so long that you don’t even notice it anymore.

One of the greatest compliments I ever received, was from the pioneer liver transplant surgeon, Thomas Starzl, the director and chief architect of the world’s largest organ transplant program whom I shadowed off and on for four years while writing a book called *Many Sleepless Nights*.

In an immersion, I take the word “shadow” literally. Shadows are cast in the background: subtle, faceless figures. Silent and unobtrusive. Which was where I positioned myself in relation to Starzl, who, wherever he traveled, was usually followed by a cumbersome entourage of nurses and colleagues. I always found a place at the fringes of this group and listened without comment to conversations, debates and disputes, showing no reaction to what I was observing, so as not to call attention to myself.

After the book was published, reviewers marveled at the intimacy of my observations of Starzl and his dealings with colleagues, patients, and families. A reporter once asked him why he permitted a writer to hover so closely.

Starzl, a slender, handsome man with a reedy voice and a stiff facade, shrugged and shook his head. “I never saw the guy!”

**STOFFERS:** *Creative Nonfiction*, the title of the journal you edit, might sound like an oxymoron to those thinking of nonfiction writing with its technical reports, newspaper articles, business writing, etc., at one end of a continuum, while poetry, short stories, and novels are grouped at the other end. Would you address this misconception?

**GUTKIND:** In creative nonfiction, writers can be poetic and journalistic simultaneously. Creative nonfiction writers are encouraged to utilize fictional techniques in their prose—from scene to dialog to description to point-of-view—and be cinematic at the same time.

In many ways, creative nonfiction is much more demanding than poetry and fiction and playwriting because it invariably asks a writer to learn more and work more diligently to complete a project.

I discovered that this kind of writing is not particularly new, but the names chosen to describe the genre are. Some people call it “literary journalism” or the “personal essay” or “expository writing.” But the newest and most popular label is “creative nonfiction.”

**STOFFERS:** What are some of the differences and similarities between creative nonfiction and fiction, and are there some works that come close to straddling both?

**GUTKIND:** In the same way that I, a creative nonfiction writer, involve myself in the lives of the people about whom I write, novelists devote months and sometimes years researching the countries in which their stories take place, blending into and understanding the culture and landscape. They study history, politics, economics.

Ernest Hemingway did not only imagine how his protagonist in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes, ran with the bulls in Pamploma, Spain; Hemingway did it first and returned year after year to celebrate and participate in the event. The adventures dramatized in all of his novels and short stories were products of his own experience.

Hemingway was wounded while working as a volunteer ambulance driver for the Italian Red Cross in World War I. He fell in love with a nurse in the hospital where he was sent to recover. His second novel, *A Farewell To Arms*, told the same story, with names changed and scenes altered. His third novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was conceived while in Spain covering the war between the fascists and communists in 1939.

Hemingway was also a prolific creative nonfiction writer. “Death in the Afternoon” is his paen to bullfighting, while *The Green Hills of Africa* tells the story of his adventures and explorations during a long and grueling safari. Although Hemingway’s reputation and his Nobel Prize were achieved through fiction, his work was rooted in nonfiction. He was one of the earliest “immersion journalists,” a writer who experienced everything about which he wrote—for more than half his life.

Were you to examine selections of Ernest Hemingway’s prose, side-by-side, it would be difficult to know which was fiction (that is to say “imagined”) and which was nonfiction. . . fact. This is an important key to the understanding and producing of creative nonfiction.

It should read something like fiction, but simultaneously be true, meaning verifiable and accurate, a difficult objective, considering the blurred gray line between fiction and creative nonfiction and between documentable fact and how we perceive those facts over time.

In writing fiction, we may be borrowing people, places and situations from our own lives, but in creative nonfiction we are capturing the world in which we live in the vivid and irrevocable truth of our own experience.

Two other famous books come to mind with which most people would be familiar, which are actually creative nonfiction. The Daniel DeFoe classic, *Robinson Crusoe*, is actually based upon a true story of a physician who was marooned on a desert island.

You have probably read at least parts of the most popular, respected and sustaining book of creative nonfiction ever written. This is the Bible. Most people accept the stories recounted in the Bible, but whether or not you value the religious aspects, the Bible is invaluable from a historic perspective. Like the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bible may or may not contain elements of fiction, but it is as close to the truth about the early days of mankind as it is humanly possible to ascertain.

**STOFFERS:** What is the relationship between creative nonfiction pieces and journalism?

**GUTKIND:** The truth is, there should not be much of a difference, although in practice “creative” or “literary” are not words we would use to describe writing in most newspapers published in the U.S.

The reason that writing in most newspapers is not considered particularly compelling is because journalism in the U.S. has, over the past half-century, been written in a formulaic way. That is, there is a special and confining structure to which newspaper reporters have been expected to adhere called “the inverted pyramid,” meaning that news stories are ordered with the most important facts of the story first and the least important last. Little or no emphasis has been given to the writer’s literary instincts.

Along with this inverted pyramid formula, newspaper writers have been expected to maintain an objective viewpoint. . . meaning not taking sides, maintaining a balanced perspective. The simple fact that objectivity is virtually impossible—we cannot hide what we feel and what we see—and subjectivity is inevitable is a reality which has only recently been acknowledged by the newspaper establishment. News stories have also been traditionally void of the “personal” or “first person” voice that is so important in creative nonfiction.

**STOFFERS:** Is some type of self-revelation necessary at some point in a creative nonfiction piece?

**GUTKIND:** What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows, but *encourages* the writer to become a part of the story or essay being written.

This personal involvement creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience.

Not that writing creative nonfiction is easy....But because writing creative nonfiction is a genuine three-dimensional experience, it provides many more outlets for satisfaction and self discovery, flexibility and freedom.

**STOFFERS:** Is it ever acceptable to alter the facts in writing creative nonfiction?

**GUTKIND:** As I have pointed out, novelists (and poets) want their work to be considered true—at least symbolically. And many novels and poems are in fact much more true than not true. So how to make the distinction?

Think of it this way: fiction must seem to be true—in part—to be believable. Hemingway's description of Spain must be accurate enough to be believable to Spaniards and to people of other cultures as well. Describe Yankee Stadium inaccurately and baseball aficionados will spurn your novel—no matter how dramatic the plot or true to life the characters.

If you changed the names, the place and other relevant details, then how does a reader distinguish between truth and distortion? Your subjects, protective of their reputations, should force you to be truthful—for good or for bad. If you say something critical about another individual, your only real defense or explanation is the truth.

Creative nonfiction carries the writer and the reader into a deeper dimension of trust, truth and believability. The creative nonfiction writer may take certain liberties with the truth—he or she may push the blurred gray barrier between fiction and nonfiction to the limit—without breaking through to the other side.☒