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Using The Techniques Of Fiction To Make Your Creative Nonfiction Even More Creative: Character, Setting, and Drama

Richard Goodman | October/November 2007

NOTES

The fact that the characters in the story are, or were, actually alive can be an inhibitor to good prose. Especially when these characters are well known- and often related-to the writer. They are quite embedded in the writer's consciousness, and exist in a kind of shorthand in his or her mind.

A great irony of creative nonfiction is that one of its chief assets is also one of its chief liabilities. The fact is that in nonfiction, everything actually happened. It's all true. One of the reasons we eagerly turn to nonfiction is because we have it on reliable source-most often, in any case-that the events on the page actually took place, and the people who did them were, or are, real. A good part of our astonishment at

reading Ernest Shackleton's account of his eight-hundred-mile open boat voyage from Elephant Island across the terrible frigid sea to South Georgia Island, for example, is that real men went through this, with real fears and real hopes, who had real families at home, and real men left behind, cold and hungry, depending on their success. This *happened*.

This is what makes the book, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors,* so strong, as well. The story of an airplane crashing in the Andes and the survivors resorting to eating the flesh of their dead comrades in order to survive moves us deeply. Real people, not so unlike us, went through that experience-one day something like that might happen to one of us. We wonder how we might act. If this were in a novel, we might easily dismiss it, and it probably wouldn't plague our hearts and minds with sympathy and horror in so intimate a way as it does in *Alive*.

But the cold clear fact is that no matter how astonishing the story, there is no guarantee that it will be interesting writing. Many writers of nonfiction, particularly in the ever-burgeoning category of memoir, seem to believe the strength of their subject is enough to keep the reader captivated. After all, if you slept with your mother, or father, or both, and your dog, shouldn't that be sufficient to keep the reader turning the pages? More seriously, the stories of memoir, and of nonfiction in general, are often desperately sad, even tragic-and in some cases, as with Ernest Shackleton's, heroic-and so writers, under the sway of the powerful emotions associated with those events, often feel that simply by spilling out those events on the page like the contents of a tool box, the reader will experience these emotions as clearly and strongly as the writer.

Not so. Or, often enough, not so. So the fact that something actually happened is both the boon and the bane of creative nonfiction. It's a terrific asset, because so many of the things that happen in real life would just not be plausible in fiction. How many times have we heard someone say, "If this were an idea for a novel, it would be laughable. But it *really happened*." So, you can tell those implausible stories in nonfiction, because, by the very nature of the genre, they did indeed happen. However, the fact of a crash in the Andes, or a climb up Everest, or a battle against cancer, or living under a cruel and repressive government, is not enough to make the *writing* good. In too many cases, the subject matter can work against the writer. It can lull the writer into a false sense of literary security.

Here's something else: The fact that the characters in the story are, or were, actually alive can be an inhibitor to good prose. Especially when these characters are well known-and often related-to the writer. They are quite embedded in the writer's consciousness, and exist in a kind of shorthand in his or her mind. Invented characters do not, because the writer has to start from scratch. They are built brick by brick, as it were, gesture by gesture, opinion by opinion, act by act, strand of hair by strand of hair, so that they are almost as fresh to the reader as they are to the writer.

In the case of Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury,* for instance,it began with Faulkner seeing in his mind's eye a picture of the young girl's muddy drawers as she climbed a tree. He built his character from there. In other words, the reader, in one sense, knows the characters nearly as well, or for nearly as long, as the writer. That is not the case with nonfiction characters. The writer often knows them much better than the reader ever will. The reader doesn't know them at all, to begin with, while the writer may have been living with them for years, either literally-or figuratively, through research. So there can be an enormous gap between reader and writer. If the writer isn't conscious of this gap, then he or she can leave the reader behind, looking at a shell of a character and wondering where the rest of the body is.

Think of your conversations with your siblings or parents about a relative or a close friend. You don't have to *explain* anything to each other. If, for example, you have an uncle who likes to steal ashtrays at

social occasions, you don't have to say to a sibling, "Well, you know how Berty likes to steal ashtrays at parties." If you did, you'd be telling the other person something he or she already knows, and it would be more of a conversation opener than anything else. You could just declare, "Well, Berty took another one. And this time he really outdid himself." This common accrued knowledge allows for a kind of emotional code, or shorthand. Sometimes nonfiction writers write this way, as if their readers know a lot more about the character, or characters, than they actually do. They can be far too assuming. It may be unintended assuming, or subconscious assuming, but it is assuming nevertheless.

The nonfiction writer must step back and consider his or her characters as strangers. He or she must introducethem to the reader, as if the character or characters stepped out of a novel, or out of thin air, as it were. This can be difficult. How do you look at your father, your mother, your husband, and your children as strangers? Well, you can. And you must. It's imperative to make your characters-and this seems quite paradoxical-as real as any fictional characters. They must be built from the ground up.

You can do that with the help of the techniques of fiction, and by being continually aware of the need to make them real.

These same commitments to achieving the realism fictional characters possess apply as well to other aspects of fiction-to setting the scene; to creating a sense of drama; to choosing the exact word; to creating a kind of music, or melody in your nonfiction prose; in fact, to all the subtleties of fine fiction. This essay aims to point out some of these areas, and to demonstrate, with examples from the world of fiction, how your nonfiction writing can become more dynamic. In short, how it can have the advantages of nonfiction with the proven techniques of fiction. The fact is, many nonfiction writers I've taught are often mystified about why their story isn't as well-received as they think it should be. "But... it's such a tragic story! It's so full of pain and sorrow!" Yes, for *you*. Now, you have to make the *reader* feel that as well. That's a different story.

It all begins with character. Character is at the heart of any story. We remember books by their characters. In very rare cases, as with Ivan Turgenev's books, we may remember the landscape as fixedly as the characters, but there are not many writers with the sensitivity and deep connection to nature-not to mention genius-as he. We *remember* Don Quixote, David Copperfield, Robinson Crusoe, Huck Finn, Jay Gatsby, Nathan Zuckerman, and so on. The question, for the nonfiction writer, is how, and why.

Often, the most important character of all in nonfiction is the narrator, especially in memoir. The narrator, of course, is you. But you as a *character.* Some writings recently have taken pains to demonstrate why and how you, as the writer, need to separate yourself from your basic everyday ego and to mould yourself into a character. One fine example is Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*.[1] It's *difficult* having this ego tied to us, to borrow from Yeats, "as to a dog's tail." I think it's a good idea to distance yourself from your ego-as a character, I mean-as much as possible. You need your ego, naturally, to write. The ego provides all that confidence you require to justify putting pen to paper. But when your *self* lacks perspective and humility, then you, the narrator, can become overwhelming, if not downright boorish at times. So, how do you keep yourself as a respectable character who doesn't chew the scenery or simply become too overbearing-a kind of tyrant in ink?

There's no better example than *The Great Gatsby.* It's written in the first person-but what a sweet, somewhat diffident, wonder-filled narrator Nick Carraway is. From the opening lines where Nick harkens back to some words of wisdom from his father, the tone is set:

> In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.
> "Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

And shortly after, Nick says, "In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgment, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores."2

We know right away that we're dealing with a sympathetic nature. We're dealing with someone whom people confide in. We all know these kinds of people. We feel safe with them. They aren't going to judge us. That doesn't make them any less intelligent or perceptive. It just means they have a generous heart. This is Nick Carraway, the man-the narrator-with whom we are going to pass several hundred pages. And we are most pleased to be in his company. Now, can we say Fitzgerald was Carraway? Not really. They may have things in common-an obsessive, worshipful curiosity about wealth, perhaps. But Nick Carraway must be separate from Fitzgerald; he will live forever, and he must perform his job each and every time a reader picks up *The Great Gatsby.*

Nick is an excellent role model, as far as narrators go. The traits of diffidence, courtesy, sympathy, and a sense of wonder can go a long way toward creating a narrator who is likeable and effective. Your story may require a tougher narrator-the Dorothy Allison of *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature,* for example. But I think you will notice that her narrator is still extremely vulnerable. So you may be able to have both. The idea is to look at *Gatsby,* at its narrator, and see what you can use in developing your own narrator.

As a narrator, you certainly want to distance yourself from self-pity, that most lethal of emotions, especially if you are telling a pitiful story. You can look to *The Catcher in the Rye* for a good lesson on how to avoid that. This is a novel about that inherently dangerous field mined with self-pity-adolescence. How does the first person narrator, Holden Caulfield, save us from a roomful of hand-wringing angst?

With humor. With the sub-category of lacerating sarcasm, much of it directed at himself. We remember, for instance, Holden pledging that he won't try to kiss or fondle any girl he doesn't like:

> I keep making up these sex rules for myself, and then I break them right away. Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in the ass. I broke it, though, the same week I made it-the same *night* as a matter of fact.3

This kind of wry confession can go a long way toward endearing the reader to the writer, particularly in trying circumstances. Hardly anything is so serious as to preclude humor. If you don't think so, then pick up a copy of Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* that incredibly graphic novel about the Holocaust. Full as it is of great pity, and compassion, it also has its share of humor, much of it at the narrator's expense. It's also a good book to examine to see how Spiegelman distanced himself from himself-in this case, with a mask of a mouse over his face. Though he is so wry as to make himself visible to us beneath the mask, it's not a very good mask. So there is both tenderness at his obviousness and wryness as well.

I think it might be a good exercise to think of yourself, to think of your narrator, with a large dollop of self-deprecation. Not to take yourself so seriously. Pick out a fault of yours, or a mistake. Make it obvious to the reader. Make yourself human. Omniscient, perhaps, but not omnipotent.

A third way a writer can make us feel sympathetic toward his or her narrator in nonfiction is with honesty, with truthfulness. This isn't about facts. This is about nakedness. This is not about being selectively confessional-and aren't all confessions selective? This is about standing nude before the reader. To see that, you need just to turn to the work of Jean Rhys. She is an amazing writer, she defies category, and I'm sure she must confound critics by being so uncontritely miserable. Many of her books are about self-degradation and humiliation. This is from *Good Morning, Midnight:*

> On the contrary, it's when I am quite sane like this, when I have a couple of extra drinks and am quite sane, that I realize how lucky I am. Saved, rescued, fished-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set. Nobody would know I had ever been in it. Except, of course, that there always remains something. Yes, there always remains something.... Never mind, here I am, sane and dry, with my place to hide in. What more do I want?... I'm a bit of an automaton, but sane, surely-dry, cold and sane. Now I have forgotten about dark streets, dark rivers, the pain, the struggle and the drowning.... Mind you, I'm not talking about the struggle when you are strong and a good swimmer and there are willing and eager friends on the bank waiting to pull you out at the first sign of distress. I mean the real thing. You jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter.[4]

If that doesn't put a shiver down your spine, I'm not sure what will. It also has another effect on the reader-one of deep sympathy for this writer's bravery. I think the idea is to be less protective of yourself as narrator. Vivian Gornick does an admirable job of this in her memoir, *Fierce Attachments*. This is not a woman who is at peace with herself, and who perhaps may not even like herself. You trust this narrator, because she doesn't hide.

Now let's turn to characters *other* than the narrator: To the characters in your story. Character in fiction is defined, basically, in five ways: By what a person says or thinks; by the dialogue that person has with other characters; by what a person does; by what others say about that person; and by the physical description of that person. There are likely more methods, but these seem to me sufficient, at least to begin with. Here's how Joseph Conrad shows us his Lord Jim for the first time:

> He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, heard forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull. His voice was deep, loud, and his manner displayed a kind of dogged self-assertion which had nothing aggressive in it. It seemed a necessity, and it was directed apparently as much at himself as at anybody else.[5]

These three sentences bear scrutiny. The details are fascinating, starting with the height, "an inch, perhaps two," which, in its indefiniteness, makes it absolutely precise and indelible. Moreover, there is, in the physical description, a foreshadowing of what we will come to know. The "deep, loud voice" has "nothing aggressive in it" and "was directed apparently as much at himself as at anybody else." This is the man who left hundreds of pilgrims to die on the open water, and must live with that decision inside himself for the rest of his life. The aggression is turned inward. His deep, loud voice is meant for him.

Not many of us can write like Conrad; however, that shouldn't preclude us from drawing our nonfiction characters more vividly. Conrad is a good model for us in that effort. There's no reason at all you can't describe your grandfather or brother or uncle with more dramatic precision by simply paying very close attention to how they walk, talk, sit, run, eat, etc.

As for making a character more three-dimensional by showing us how he or she thinks, one of the classic examples of this is Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground,* perhaps the most famous rant in literature. A passage which demonstrates the wonderfully bizarre humor of the novella comes toward the end of Part I:

> I'd feel better if I could only believe something of what I've written down here. But I swear I can't believe a single word of it. That is, I believe it in a way, but at the same time, I feel I'm lying like a son of a bitch.
> "Then why have you written all this?" you may ask.
> Well, I wish I could stick you into a mousehole for forty years or so with nothing to do, and at the end of that time I'd like to see what kind of state you'd be in.6

Too true. And what are we to believe at this point?

Of course, the master of the interior monologue was Shakespeare, but we'll leave the Bard and his fellow dramatists alone and stay with our writers of fiction.

In a variation on this, you can demonstrate qualities of your character by showing your readers letters they have written. This has been done in fiction consistently. There is an entire genre devoted to this. In nonfiction, Russell Baker uses this technique ably by quoting from a series of poignant letters from a suitor of his mother's in his book, *Growing Up*. The letters were written during the depression, and finally, at a certain point, the writer, a man whose English is not perfect-and this makes the letters even more touching-simply is swallowed up by the hard times, and disappears. His letters reveal matters of the heart that even the surest writer couldn't capture. Letters are often available to memoirists. They can make a strong addition to a story and show us more of who that person really is you're trying to tell us about. The letters of ordinary men and women weren't written for publication. They have an openness and great informality that reveals much about who they are, as if we've spent a Saturday afternoon with them in the back yard.

Now, how about the idea of making a character stronger on the page by showing what people say about him or her? I think of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. We all remember when the spirit of Christmas to come takes Scrooge to a conversation between two men who are speaking about Scrooge himself. Scrooge doesn't realize who they are talking about as he eavesdrops, and the men say things none too kindly about him. Then, of course, he realizes they are speaking of him *posthumously*. What a literary device that is! Now, you can't have your characters reveal the future, but you can certainly record conversations that other people have about them.

A wonderful example of an entire book constructed this way is *Edie: American Girl,* edited by Jean Stein and George Plimpton, which is the story of Edie Sedgwick, an Andy Warhol girl, as told by people who knew her. (A movie has recently been made about her.) I don't think Edie herself utters a word in the book. It's one of the most effective and original American biographies ever written, and by proxy, as it were. I think especially of people you want to write about who have recently died. There often are others who knew them and are living, and who can speak about them. This is what Laura Hillenbrand found out in writing her book, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. The three main characters in her book had passed away, but there were plenty of people who knew them, and who had seen the great Seabiscuit race. Her greatest source, Hillenbrand has said about her book, was living memory.

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are almost as fresh to the to the reader as they are to the writer.

We can again turn to Conrad for another instance of drawing a character by what other people say about him-to *Heart of Darkness* and the infamous Kurtz. As the narrator Marlow's boat edges further and further down the Congo, we hear more and more about the fabled ivory hunter Kurtz-and we hear that wonderful line, "The man has enlarged my mind!" uttered by one of Kurtz's worshipful minions. His reputation grows more grotesquely huge until Kurtz becomes both a god and a devil in our minds. We know him chiefly by what others say of him, and that makes his legend even larger and more dramatic. When we finally do meet him, he is nothing like his legend. The jungle has made a shadow of him. This is the carefully planned shock Conrad gives us. In *Apocalypse Now*, when Francis Ford Coppola finally shows us his Kurtz in the form of Marlon Brando, I think there is a palpable letdown. He develops Kurtz the same way as Conrad does-by having others speak of him in great and awesome detail. No living being can equal that reputation, and we might be better off, perhaps, never meeting the man.

We can know a character by what he or she does. And for that, look to Henry Miller. As Paul Theroux wrote in an obituary about Miller, he had one subject and that was himself. But he wrote novels, he wrote fiction. He is the narrator and the main character in most of his books, if not in all. (This is true even in his critical books. The poet Karl Shapiro said Miller's study of Arthur Rimbaud in *The Time of the Assassins* is as much about Miller as it is about Rimbaud.) So, here you have a narrator whose actions are doubtful to say the least. In *The Rosy Crucifixion*, he mistreats his wife terribly and abandons his child. He considers his only responsibility to be that toward his own talent. He borrows money from anyone who breathes, fully intending never to pay it back. He glorifies himself in conversation. After a while, we get a pretty good picture of the man. The fact that some of us still find him worthy-and I am one of them-is a measure, I think, of other more admirable aspects of his character.

I remember in Susan Cheever's memoir, *Home Before Dark,* she speaks of how her famous father, the writer John Cheever, was poorly paid by the *New Yorker,* but yet chose to remain with them, even in lieu of a much more lucrative offer from I think it was the *Saturday Evening Post*. He had a family to support, and didn't make much money, and so the revelation of this decision carries great weight with the reader.

As for dialogue revealing character, a strong example is Hemingway's short story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." This story is set in a cafe in Spain late at night, near or even past closing time, where two waiters are waiting on an old man to finish his drink so they can close up. But the old man doesn't want to leave. He wants another drink. He likes the cafe, where he feels comfortable, and can maintain a sense of dignity. Most of the story is a dialogue between the two waiters about the old man. What we learn, just by what the men say, is that the two waiters are very different. One is ultimately sympathetic toward the old man, and the other is not. Hemingway constructs the dialogue in such a way as to show us the lack of sympathy in one waiter and the tenderness and compassion in the other. All with conversation. Let your nonfiction characters develop on the page with dialogue. Their words will reveal themselves.

Nonfiction has done a much better job in terms of setting the scene, I think. This probably has a lot to do with the fact that so much of it takes place outside. Think of all the splendid nature writing, and adventure writing-from Thoreau to Muir to Dillard, from Shackleton to Saint Exupery, we have fine settings of scenes. But I think memoirists must pay heed here. Setting the scene precisely and well is too often overlooked in memoir. I'm not sure exactly why. But we-the readers-want to be *grounded*. We want to know where we are. What kind of world we're in. Not only that, it is so often the case in nonfiction that the scene itself is a kind of character. Take the Kansas of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood,* for

example. Capote takes pains right at the beginning of his book to set the scene of his multiple murders on the plains and wheat fields of the Midwest. I think the movies of his book were influenced by this emphasis as well.

Photography can help here, also. If you look once again at the photographs Walker Evans took as part of what would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee, you will have a memorable lesson. The people are heartbreaking, yes, and some will stay with you until the day you die. But look at the *setting,* look at the scene, look at the black and white photographs of the houses and the rooms and the porches these people lived in. Look at their beds, at their chairs, tables, walls. That is in many ways as heartbreaking as the people themselves. *They* tell a story. Nonfiction writers should show the reader where the story takes place, and in vivid detail. John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* is an example of how one can set a scene. Here's how that novel begins,

> I went back to the Devon School not long ago, and found it looking oddly newer than when I was a student there fifteen years before. It seemed more sedate than I remembered it, more perpendicular and straight-laced, with narrower windows and shinier woodwork, as though a coat of varnish had been put on everything for better preservation. But, of course, fifteen years before there had been a war going on. Perhaps the school wasn't as well kept up in those days; perhaps varnish, along with everything else, had gone to war.7

This is not an especially dramatic opening; in fact, it's very calm, and easy. What one notices, though, is the soft personification of the school. It is "more sedate," and "straight-laced." Right away, the school is being likened to a person, perhaps to a typical boarding school teacher. I think the point here is that this kind of method can be applied to any place, to any building, to any store, and so on. When I spoke to some students recently about setting, I asked them to describe the building we were all in-which happened to be an old wooden church-as a person. They were to do this in the form of a metaphor, not a simile; in other words, the building *was* the person, or vice-versa. Any nonfiction writer can employ this method in describing the house they grew up in, or the school he or she attended. It gives more bounce to the prose. It makes it stronger.

Let's compare this to the beginning of *Guard of Honor* by James Gould Cozzens, an author best known for his book, *By Love Possessed*. *Guard of Honor* is a fine book, and you will often see it on "Neglected Novels" lists that are compiled once in a while. Here is its beginning and scene setting:

> Through the late afternoon they flew southeast, going home to Ocanara at about two hundred miles an hour. Inside the spic and span fuselage-the plane was a new twin-engine advanced trainer of the type designated AT-7-this speed was not noticeable. Though the engines steadily and powerfully vibrated and time was passing, the shining plane seemed stationary, swaying gently and slightly oscillating, a little higher than the stationary, dull-crimson sphere of the low sun. It hung at perpetual dead center in an immense shallow bowl of summer haze, delicately lavender. The bottom of the bowl, six thousand feet below, was colored a soft olive brown; a blending, hardly distinguishable, of the wide, swampy river courses, the overgrown hammocks, the rolling, heat-shaken savannas, the dry, trackless, palmetto flatlands that make up so much of the rank but poor champaign of lower Alabama and northwestern Florida. Within the last few minutes, far off and too gradually to break the illusion of standing still, the dim, irregular edge of an enormous, flat, metallic-gray splotch had begin to appear. It was the Gulf of Mexico.8

Aside from the extended alliteration, most of it with "s's," and quite surprisingly successful, one can find

in this long paragraph some good ideas for setting the scene. Granted, the scene is being painted from a perspective far above, but just look at the wonderful "enormous, flat, metallic-gray splotch" that is the Gulf of Mexico. A splotch! The idea that you can transform an enormous body of water into a mere splotch is not just an act of creativity, but a leap of faith. You have to be more than simply creative, you have to be *bold*. You have to trust yourself. Somewhere inside, you are telling yourself, well, it looks like a splotch, like some ink I spilt. Perhaps another part of you is saying, don't be absurd, this is a gigantic body of water, you can't call it a splotch. Cozzens listened to the right voice, and we, his readers, benefit from his courage. Let this be a lesson for our nonfiction.

Now we come to drama.

We writers all want it. We all need it. We want our readers to be thrilled, excited, moved, and, most of all, *not* bored. In creative nonfiction, we need drama at least as much as in fiction. That's because, to return to the opening premise of this essay, the subject matters for nonfiction, and especially for memoir, are inherently dramatic-dying of cancer, being molested, falling off a mountain-but the writer may too often decide the fact these things actually happened is sufficient drama in itself. That can be a fatal mistake. The question is how can we take these events and produce a drama that extends far beyond ourselves to the rest of the unknown world.

A third way a writer can make us feel sympathetic toward his or her narrator in nonfiction is with honesty, with truthfulness. This isn't about facts. This is about nakedness. This is not about being selectively confessional-and aren't all confessions selective? This is about standing nude before the reader.

Drama comes in all shapes and sizes. I believe drama is best produced quietly, rather than by shouting or by weeping and wailing. It often takes a while to produce. There is a memorable example in a Sherwood Anderson short story, "Adventure," from *Winesburg, Ohio*. The main character, Alice Hindman, makes love with a young man one reckless evening, only to have him leave for Chicago to seek his fortune. He promises to return, or to send for her, and then they will be married. But he never does. Still, she keeps waiting through the years. Her behavior becomes more and more erratic. Finally, one stormy evening, "a strange desire took possession of her," and she undresses and runs naked out of the house into the rain. A drunken old man wandering by sees her:

> Alice dropped to the ground and lay trembling. She was so frightened at the thought of what she had done that when the man had gone on his way she did not dare get to her feet, but crawled on hands and knees through the grass to the house. When she got to her own room she bolted the door and drew her dressing table across the doorway. Her body shook as with a chill and her hands trembled so that she had difficulty getting into her night-dress. When she got into bed she buried her face in the pillow and wept brokenheartedly. "What is the matter with me? I will do something dreadful if I am not careful," she thought, and turning her face to the wall, began trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg.[9]

That last sentence! It explodes with drama, quietly on the page, but hugely in our hearts, because of all the dashed hopes and delusions that have preceded it, step by quiet step. Anderson is a master at telling a story simply and surely.

The opening line of your story can have as much drama as the last line. I don't mean to suggest that every story you write needs to have a dramatic opening line and ending line, but, well, that wouldn't be

bad either. Your first line should capture the reader's attention and force him or her to read onward. This can be accomplished by making it a kind of ultra-condensed piece of information. Take the beginning of Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat:" "None of them knew the color of the sky." We understand, from the title of the story, that there is an open boat. We infer that the said open boat is on the sea, or on some large body of water. We also infer there are people in it. So, when we are given the information that none of them knew the color of the sky, we also infer, and rightly, because the sentence is so precisely constructed, that they are too weary to raise their heads to determine the color of the sky. Ultimately, we conclude that they have been in this open boat for a long time, which is exactly what Crane wants us to conclude. All done with a mere nine words.

One more example of the calm before the storm-again, from *In Cold Blood*. We remember that Truman Capote is relating the killer Perry Smith's account of the Clutter family murder. Smith is calmly and evenly talking about Herb Clutter, the father. Up to this point, we know Smith is the killer, but he's never admitted it. Then, he says, simply, "I didn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat."[10] Nothing else, no exclamation marks. No, "Oh my God's!" from Capote. Just that-naked for us to see. Then on to the next paragraph. This seems to me a perfect example of how to convey something horrible (or sad, or tragic, or miserable) to the reader-calmly and clearly, without editorializing.

Creating drama, then, is often a case of letting the act speak for itself.

Of course, if you do have something really dramatic to reveal, sometimes the best way to reveal it is with a big, fat splash. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* Sherlock Holmes is being told the details of the death of Sir Charles Baskerville by his friend and doctor, James Mortimer. This is how Conan Doyle ends Chapter II:

> But one false statement was made by Barrymore (the butler) at the inquest. He said that there were no traces upon the ground round the body. He did not observe any. But I did-some little distance off, but fresh and clear.
> "Footprints?"
> "Footprints."
> "A man or woman's?"
> Dr. Mortimer looked strangely at us for an instant and his voice sank almost to a whisper as he answered:
> "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!"[11]

Some things you don't want to leave to the imagination. You don't want to whisper them. There is absolutely nothing wrong about being emphatic when you need to be. Notice, though, how that scene, that entire chapter, builds up to this dramatic revelation, and how it leaves us hanging, almost falling in anticipation. There is no reason why you cannot think specifically of drama when writing nonfiction in the way a fiction writer does, by creating a sense of surprise for the reader, either softly or loudly. This is far more than just spilling the events on the page.

The fact that your story is true is a powerful weapon to have on your side. The idea, though, is not to take the writing of it for granted. And for that lesson, there is no better place to turn than to the world of fiction. The very best creative nonfiction writers always have, and you feel that world reverberate through their stories like a bell.

AWP

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NOTES

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