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Creative Nonfiction Workshop

Ways of Responding to Manuscripts

We are reading each others' works-in-progress so it's unreasonable to expect polish. Don't waste time suggesting editing changes. Save that for a later stage in the process. The purpose of your response is to lay out some choices. What are some of the things the writer *might* try in the revision? How might they change the story for the better? All of these ideas are necessarily speculative, and they may not even be helpful. But we offer them in a generous spirit, knowing that our job as readers is simply to help writers see possibilities in the manuscript that may not have occurred to them, and we hope they'll do the same for us. The letter form of the response—a direct address to the writer in a relatively intimate, casual genre—is intended to encourage this spirit of generosity and high regard for each other.

More specifically, though, there are ways of responding that you might find most useful for a particular manuscript.

- **What is the story of your experience as a reader?** When you first started reading the piece what were you thinking and feeling, and then what? And then? What were moments in the piece that you found memorable, that stayed with you? When did you feel lost and need more guidance? When you finished reading, what did you understand (about the writer or the subject) that you didn't understand fully when you began?
- **What is the "situation" and what is the "story"?** Vivian Gornick's distinction between what happened and what the writer has come to understand about it is a fundamental way of responding. Most often, the situation isn't unclear, the story is. Where exactly in the manuscript does the writer seem to address the story explicitly and how satisfied are you with what it says? What interests you about these ideas? What would you suggest that the writer might continue to explore?
- **What might be the structure?** Chronology is the logical baseline of narrative. Sometimes (perhaps often) it's the best way to tell a story. In chronological stories, one of the key structural questions is focused on emphasis—in light of the story the writer seems to be telling are the important *parts* of the situation given the proper amount of attention? On the other hand, perhaps chronology isn't the only way to sequence the material. How might it be disrupted to not only give certain scenes emphasis but to increase the dramatic tension? It's often most helpful to get at this by talking about alternative beginnings.
- **What are the research possibilities?** Some topics obviously lend themselves to outside reading and interview, particularly those that arise from a writer's observations of things. But even the most personal memoir can benefit from research. Can you imagine what it might be interesting to know or to find out, information that might push the writer more deeply into the material or make the narrative itself more interesting?