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### **Truth-telling In Creative Nonfiction**

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction learns—when the article or book appears—*his* hard lesson.

Janet Malcom—*The Journalist and the Murderer*

Some writers proceed by trying to discover the truth about a situation, and then invent or distort the facts as necessary. Even in these suspicious times, writers can get away with this. Often no one will know, and the subjects of the story may not care. They may not notice. But the writer always knows. I believe in immersion in the events of the story. I take it on faith that the truth lies in the events somewhere, and that immersion in those real events will yield glimpse of that truth. I try to hew to what has begun to seem like a narrow definition of nonfiction partly in that faith, and partly out of fear. I'm afraid that if I started making up things in a story that purported to be about real events and people, I'd stop believing it myself. And I imagine that such a loss of conviction would infect every sentence and make each one unbelievable.

Tracy Kidder, "Courting the Approval of the Dead"

"That simply not true," the members of my family frequently tell me when they come up against my memory of a shared event. "The party was *not* for you, the spider was *not* a black widow, *it wasn't that way at all.*" Very like they are right, for not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters...*how it felt to be me*: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook.

Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook"

The writer of nonfiction produces a document for an audience that reads history as both text and experience, an audience that is engaged over the edge, by which I mean both inside and outside the story.

Daniel W. Lehman, *Matters of Fact*

In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of the truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.

Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story"

Frankly, I don't much care what label we put on "A Hanging"—fiction or nonfiction, it is a powerful statement either way—but Orwell might have cared a great deal. I say this because not long ago I was bemused and then vexed to find one of my own essays treated in a scholarly article as a work of fiction. Here was my earnest report about growing up on a military base, my heartfelt rendering of indelible memories, being confused with the airy figments of novelists! To be sure, in writing the piece I had used dialogue, scenes, settings, character descriptions, the whole fictional bag of tricks...but I was writing about the actual, not the invented. I shaped the matter, I did not make it up...In composing an essay about what it was like to grow up on that military base, I *meant* something quite different from what I mean when concocting a story...I believe one writes, in essays, with regard for the actual world, with a respect for the shared substance of history, the autonomy of other lives, the being of nature, the mystery and majesty of a creation we have not made.

Scott Russell Sanders, "The Singular First Person"

A personal narrative is a tale taken from life — that is, from actual not imagined occurrences — and is related by a first person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements, it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story: to shape a piece of experience out of the raw materials of one's own life so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one that has meaning for the disinterested reader. What actually happened is only raw material; what matters is what the memoirist makes of what happened; or, put differently, what matters is the way the memoirist reflects on what happened. As V. S. Pritchett said of the genre: "It's all in the art, you get no credit for living."

Vivian Gornick, "Truth in Personal Narrative"