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Art of Reflection

The movement between now and then-narrator is a feature of many of the excerpts, but these variations are particularly worth examining. Didion is the master the master of the one-line reflection, a quick and often devastating strike of reflective insight. The White selection on the circus girl begins with the particularity of scene and then whirls out into a commentary on its "universal magic." White's now-narrator is notable in the personal essay tradition for its whimsical, wise, sentimental, and sometimes vulnerable voice. Sanders writes in the tradition of White, moving back and forth from showing and telling. It's interesting to contrast all of these writers whose reflective turn is usually so apparent with the excerpt from McCourt. *Angela's Ashes* was written from the point of view of a boy. How does the man—Mccourt—find room to express the insight that the writer brings to the experiences of the boy? William's excerpt from *Refuge* is an interesting of extended reflection.

Endings

There is ample discussion of what makes a strong beginning to nonfiction work but little of what constitutes a strong ending. This is odd, especially since we all know the end of any work may be its most important part. The only excerpt to study (other than the full essays at the back of the book) to look at the chemistry of ending is Baldwin's. But what an amazing ending it is.

Description

There's nothing quite like Agee's extended description of the smell of the Gudger's shack. Rarely do we see such an intense description that draws on multiple senses. Both Didion and Ehrlich are extraordinary observers of place—Didion with her

nearly list-like (and deeply ironic) inventory of the San Fernando valley in the sixties, and Ehrlich with her lyric descriptions of Wyoming winters. The Blue excerpt provides an excellent example of how description (and scene) deploys details with a logical arrangement—spatial or narrative.

Structure

Excerpts can only allow study of micro-structures: the organization of scene, description, beginnings, endings, and so on. But there are hints of larger designs, especially the segmented (and recurrent) structure of Walker's "Beauty." The use of line spaces—how they not only create segments but new points of emphasis—is always worth studying. The Momaday excerpt might be most striking. He uses a three segment pattern throughout the memoir in a pattern of mythical, historical, and autobiographical mosaics. The use of font to signal these differences hints at the lyrical essay. Monson's excerpt also showcases how the entire work is organized. He uses the Harvard outline—a found form—as a design for his essay that mines the memory of his family. Purpura's "Autopsy Report" at the back of the book is a fuller study of the lyric form and the segmented essay structure. I included the Williams excerpt from *Refuge* because the book from which it is drawn is structured around the rise and fall of the water levels at Great Salt Lake during a flood year.

Scene

Novelists like Tobias Wolff, Frank McCourt, and Truman Capote create nonfiction scenes that we recognize from fiction: spare, often dialogue-driven that typically have some kind of dramatic action. It's useful, then, to study scenes like those in Blue and Dubus in which the remembered scene features—at least overtly—much less drama. In fact, sometimes the "action" in a nonfiction scene is a moment of insight. But something always does happen in a scene, and it's useful to study these excerpts for elements of design, including point-of-view (camera position) and the sense of space. Scenes often seem to create three dimensions, a space through which people or things move or can be seen. For fun, it might be interesting to look as well at how scenes are created through research. For that, use Capote or Larson excerpts.

Ethics

The discussion of truth telling is both fascinating and exhausting. What is the nonfiction writer's primary obligation: to the reality of what happened or to the story? What kind of "fabrication" or imagining is reasonable? Most of these excerpts raise these questions. The Mitchell excerpt on "Old Mr. Flood" is a composite character. The Larson and Capote scenes both take the point of view of dead people, making assumptions about what they were thinking in moments they were alive. Kingston's excerpt takes a turn into fantasy. What are we willing to allow when it comes to "getting things right?" The Mair's excerpt raises interesting questions about both how much confession we are comfortable with in nonfiction,

and the ethical issues of how those confessions impact others. Finally, humor (Sedaris) presents a special case. Do we permit exaggeration in nonfiction? Sedaris says his essays are “truthy” but is that enough? These ethical questions are linked to genre, of course, and ultimately raise the question of what we mean when we say something is a work of nonfiction.

Genre

Perhaps the oldest form of creative nonfiction is the personal essay, which was the invention of Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century. But since then it has evolved dramatically. In recent years, for example, there was the emergence of the lyric essay, a fascinating experiment in language and structure. *Crafting Truth* includes examples of these breaks with tradition. The Native American writer M. Scott Momaday’s *Way to Rainy Mountain* features three narrative strands roped around each other. Lauren Slater’s *Lying* tests the boundaries of truth-telling, and Maxine Hong Kingston experiments with fantasy in her memoir *Woman Warrior*. The power of excerpts is that each of these can easily be read together, demonstrating how writers challenge and bend tradition in creative nonfiction.

Persona

On the surface, it seems relatively straightforward. In nonfiction, the persona of the writer is the actual writer herself who speaks through the text. But language, context, and especially the writer’s emotional relationship to the subject births a different character, one that often strays from the author who composed the work. Like fiction writers, nonfiction writers create a persona that serves the subject. Sometimes they do this explicitly, as in Mailer’s persona “Mailer” in *Armies in the Night*. Writers like Tom Wolfe in *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* submerge their narrative presence entirely, speaking omnisciently like a novelist. Others like David Sedaris create a persona that carries the work, one that may be invoked repeatedly in essay after essay because it’s a voice and consciousness readers come to embrace.

Character/Profile

Nonfiction narrators can be characters but especially in forms like literary journalism other people are fashioned as characters much like people that populate fiction. The profile is the most obvious example. Several excerpts in *Crafting Truth* are from profiles, including Jane Kramer’s remarkable portrait on a Texas cowboy, one in which she does something that is impossible without extensive reporting—get into his head and describe what he is thinking. Joseph Mitchell’s profiles for the *New Yorker* of New York City characters are legendary. The most famous may be his portrait of Mr. Flood, a “low-life” character hunting for his next drink and meal in the city’s Fulton Fish Market. Flood was a composite character, something Mitchell readily admitted, though the idea of combining the qualities of several, similar types seems out of bounds for nonfiction.

Research

When we think of sources of information for creative nonfiction, two things readily come to mind: personal experience and reporting. But more conventional research—books, articles, and even scholarship—can be vital sources for nonfiction writers. The poet Diane Ackerman demonstrates this best. Her book *Natural History of the Senses* demonstrates how writers can colonize research with strong prose and make it not seem like research at all.