We All Have “Lots of Yesterdays”

How Creative Nonfiction Enlivens the Secondary Writing Classroom

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Seeing the Unforeseen Benefits of a Creative Nonfiction Writers’ Workshop: An Introduction

BY DAVE WINTER

I became a believer in workshops after spending three weeks as a fellow of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project’s (Georgia) Advanced Summer Writing Institute during the summer of 1999. My experience as a writer meeting the expectations of my workshop colleagues convinced me of the many benefits of writing within a collaborative environment. I produced writing to meet an external deadline so that I didn’t let my colleagues down. I wrote to the best of my ability because I did not want them to feel like I was wasting their time.

When through the grace of some higher power I was granted a small seminar class—Advanced Placement Language and Composition—for seniors at Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia, where I teach, I seized the opportunity to turn the class into a nonfiction writers’ workshop. Every Thursday of the semester-long course, the students brought in nonfiction pieces. I provided some direction with each writing task: one week we wrote personal narratives; the next, argumentative columns. On successive Thursdays, we wrote satires—the first blunt, the second subtle. Later in the course, we wrote op-ed pieces built upon a central analogy. Some assignments I wrote with my students; others I didn’t, but by establishing a clear workshop routine, I hoped to help my students become a community of writers, just as my colleagues and I had two summers before.

The students fulfilled my hopes. Their writing was consistently excellent, and their commentary on each other’s writing helped each writer sharpen her piece further. I found myself to be less of a grader and more of a writing coach. Relishing this role, I even altered the school-required senior project so that it contributed to the writing community I was trying to build. Instead of the mandated MLA-format research paper leading to a project, I had the students write magazine-length feature articles about their projects. The students could pick any topic they wanted to pursue. Submitting the article became part of their project or the whole project. Acting as freelance journalists, my students became investigative reporters, and their research became authentic and primary, not bookish and secondary. One student explored and wrote about yoga; another, girls’ basketball. A third researched the history of the first plank road in upstate New York. These pieces, and the deep revision that the students practiced on them, confirmed my faith that my students had become writers and that addressing nonfiction writing through workshop techniques was the way to go.

I may have counted on my students’ becoming writers, but I hadn’t counted on them becoming writing teachers. That’s where
Meredith Eastburn surprised me. Meredith is one of those students who makes you glad you became a teacher but at the same time makes you feel myopic because she so often sees farther and broader than her teachers do—this teacher anyway. Her wonderful writing in my course (and as a star student journalist in my newspaper program) convinced me she was a gifted writer. But she saw beyond my objectives for her work: she wanted to become a teacher of writing, to promote writing, to save it, if you will, from what high school English classes often do to kill it. So in her senior project, she embarked on a noble experiment across the street at the middle school, where she hoped to inspire her own clientele of potential nonfiction-writing eighth-graders.

My involvement with the National Writing Project (NWP) has convinced me that I need to be a teacher writing to be a writing teacher. But Meredith’s willingness and desire to internalize and disseminate teaching strategies in creative nonfiction took me by surprise and broadened my belief that the NWP’s core principles produce benefits that are often unseen yet profound. The article that follows provides proof that the writing workshop does more than produce better student writers; it can also produce literacy advocates who can see the far-reaching potential of razing the old hierarchies of our English classrooms in favor of true writing communities.

I crossed the street that separates my high school from my former middle school. Armed with my notebook, lesson plans, and a tape recorder, I entered the middle school and found Lisa Crockett’s eighth grade gifted language arts class. First hall, third door on the right. The last of the twelve students in her fifth-period class struggled in as the bell rang. After they settled into their seats, Ms. Crockett introduced me, and then they were mine. I had come to talk with them about nonfiction writing; I left after four days with a renewed hope.

The project was my idea. I had this concern about high school students: typically, most don’t like to write. I would fall into that crowd, too, if we referred to essay writing. Through the high school journalism staff and an AP language class, however, I was lucky enough to find a type of writing that hooked me: creative nonfiction. Though paradoxical by title, writing with the label of “creative nonfiction” made sense to me. Whether you call it essay-writing without the rules and formality, or journalistic writing with a literary twist to it, creative nonfiction let me enjoy the act of writing without having to assume the intimidating title of essayist or poet or journalist. I could just write. In his book, Creative Nonfiction, Philip Gerard outlines five characteristics of this genre. He stipulates that creative nonfiction must have both an obvious subject and a deeper subject, an ironic sense of immediate timelessness, a narrative voice, a reflective tone, and well-crafted language. No pressure, right?

Maybe I just liked the idea of creative nonfiction because of everything that it was not. It was not five paragraphs and three-part theses. It was not quote attributions and MLA format. It was not the beast that high school English classes had called the “formal essay” (most often written about another piece of literature) since the beginning of time. Worried that yet another class of students would submit to the fear of the big bad E word (“Essay”) and turn its back on English classes as a whole, I was determined to give these students a taste of the good stuff early.

Eighth grade—before these kids begin the intimidating study of genre-based literature, British literature, American literature, and the ominous AP literature. Before teachers inure them with the tenets of overall structure and internal documentation. Before they mistakenly adopt the idea that English classes are boring and too restrictive. Eighth grade—while they’re still innocent.

I searched through some writing books for ideas that middle school students might embrace. The public library had everything from books on creative writing, to nonfiction writing, to teaching writing, to writers’ self-help. After sifting through them, I chose some exercises and techniques I wanted to try with the eighth-graders. But first, I wanted to know how they felt about writing—nonfiction writing, specifically.

Ms. Crockett, who had taught me language arts in eighth grade, told me two things about the students: one, while some students embraced creative writing, others would do anything to avoid extra work, and two, they all had some talent. Ms. Crockett described some of them as having natural talent. The others, she said, had to work hard to be successful writers. But they could do it.

“Natural talent means somebody who is lucky enough to find their voice early on and be comfortable with that instead of
Author to Author

trying to hold it too much to fit a writing teacher’s idea of what’s good writing,” Ms. Crockett explained.

I kept this in mind as I planned my time with the students. The first day I met with them—it was a Friday—we looked at the big picture of language arts. What did they enjoy about reading and writing? What did they think about nonfiction writing?

Heads nodded as a few students listed what they liked to read: mysteries, science fiction, fantasy—the whole spectrum of fiction. In regard to fiction, a student named Chris shared: “When they make us read [specific books], it takes a lot of the fun out of it. Because when you get to choose your own book, you get to choose your genre instead of actually having to be assigned some book. You don’t want to read it; therefore you have a negative attitude towards the book.”

On what they didn’t like to read, the class agreed that they dreaded reading poetry. And, as I had suspected, nonfiction also didn’t score high on the kids’ list of favorite things to read or to write. When they described their limited impressions of nonfiction, they only mentioned forms such as essays, biographies, and textbooks.

Textbooks? No wonder they didn’t like nonfiction.

When I asked for their reactions to school writing assignments, I had expected the groans and rolling eyes. What I hadn’t expected was how hard it would be for me to tell them that writing assignments only grew more formal in high school. They would not soon receive another short-story writing assignment like the one they had just completed for Ms. Crockett in which they wrote their own mystery piece. In high school, they would learn to write essays about short stories rather than practice the art of writing these pieces themselves. I didn’t want to scare them away from the very thing I was trying to promote. So somewhat self-serveingly, I encouraged them to sign up for the high school newspaper staff (for which I was serving as a managing editor), knowing that this outlet would give them the opportunity to have some fun with writing nonfiction.

So what would fascinate them—or at least interest them enough to write about? They told me mysteries, opinions, personal experiences.

“I like writing things I want to write. If I have to write something I don’t want to write, I hate it,” said Sarah.

Sarah’s words came to mind as I tried to choose an activity to do with the class the next week. I wanted something informal and without pressure—something personal. I found the exercise in Gerard’s Creative Nonfiction: List ten identities for yourself and then brainstorm concerns and responsibilities you have in each of these identities or roles. I modified the activity slightly: instead of ten identities, I asked them to list five. We didn’t have time to work with ten.

They liked it. Their favorite part: “list.” Not such an intimidating verb when you compare it to “write about,” “discuss,” or “analyze.”

My favorite part: my class of eighth-graders was filled with more than just students. I had cheerleaders, singers, magicians, artists, basketball players, computer programmers, sisters, sons, and baby-sitters.

Sister: It’s hard to be the one my little sister looks up to.—Melanie

Baby-sitter: I get to be an important part of their lives by reading to them and playing with them.—Stephanie

Magician: I would be concerned about doing a magic trick correctly in front of a large audience.—Aneeth

Artist: I have fun drawing, but my main concern is keeping focused. Drawing becomes frustrating.—Alex

From this activity, they now each had a list of roles and voices they could apply to their writing. I encouraged them to keep their lists so they could refer to them for inspiration. By now I had convinced them that they could be the characters in their nonfiction writing, that they did have interesting experiences to share. Many of the students were musicians, singers, or other kinds of performers, so we talked our way through a possible piece on stage fright. They all knew about the butterflies, the fear of messing up, and that classic piece of advice, to picture the audience naked. My point lay in the fact that experiences and feelings as simple or as common as these could make an accessible and fun writing subject. I wanted them to realize that the best source of inspiration for their writing was their own experience. And a nonfiction personal narrative could be a fine alternative to a short story when it comes to describing your first violin performance with the middle school orchestra.

From this introspection, we moved to an activity of external observation: the five senses. As Barbara Taylor notes in the book How Porcupines Make Love, “School seldom teaches kids how to deal with their environment” (99). The first step to dealing with your surroundings, however, must be to recognize them. So, I tried an exercise I found in Barbara Danish’s Writing as a
Second Language. I asked the class to freewrite about concrete details they were sensing at that moment. See, hear, smell, taste, feel. I wanted descriptions, not just observations, so I erased the verb “to be” from their legal vocabulary. They gave me this:

_I hear Mrs. C laughing and the overhead buzzing as it projects its reflection on the screen._—Leslie

_I can hear pens and pencils pressing against desks and the soft hum of the AC._—Melanie

_I feel a numbing pain in my butt because of these hard chairs. My back feels strained because of the poor position I’m sitting in._—Steven

_The blinding sun illuminates the beautiful oranges, reds, and yellows of the changing trees._—Stephanie

The third day, I combined the ideas of voice and observation description. In one of my library books, Bruce Ballenger and Barry Lane’s _Discovering the Writer Within_, I landed on a writing activity that involved responding to a photo in the voice of one of its subjects. I distributed copies of the photo of the dustbowl that appears in every history textbook: Dorothea Lange’s _Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California_. In the famous picture, taken during the Great Depression, three dirty children cling to their worried mother. The image provokes the questions: What has happened to these people? What is the mother thinking? What will become of them? I asked the students to respond to the picture by taking on the voice of one of the subjects and by describing the situation based on what they saw.

I sat down and wrote to this prompt with them. As soon as I started, I realized that the assignment lent itself more to fiction than nonfiction. But because I had suggested that the students adopt the voice of one of the photo’s subjects, I still thought it would be worth trying. While I worried for a moment that the students would not know what to do, I decided to see what they wrote. They approached the activity in different ways.

_“Dear God, please let us live.” As I say a quick hopeful prayer I wonder why. Why has this happened to my daughter? Why didn’t I strive for more? The second bomb raid in two weeks in our poverty-stricken town. Another bomb lands beside the lousy shelter we are in. I shield my daughters’ heads from flying debris and feel a sharp pain in my back as something hits me. I listen to them cry. While I try to be strong I crumble; I try to be hopeful but I worry._—Jessica

Jessica did try to create the voice of the mother in her response to the photo; another student inserted himself into the situation as an observer.

_As I walked down the dark streets of an industrialized city, I notice something. Two girls are crying on what looks like the shoulders of their mother. They are covering their faces and muffled their crying to be discrete, but any onlooker could tell they were sad. They looked like they were cold and trembling, although that might have been because of their persistent tears. I expected the same of their mother, but she was still. She was in deep thought as though she was on another planet. Her eyes and eyebrows had a questioning look. She takes a ring off her finger and places it in a box. The mother then looked at a picture of her husband and began to cry._—Alex

Behold creativity. Although they had strayed from the actual historical context of the photo, the kids proved that the assignment was worthwhile as an exercise in imagination. Once they loosened up and let their creative juices flow, their writing breathed. They liked the idea of writing in a voice other than their own. Whether that meant changing their point of view or simply the age of the speaker, they seemed to enjoy experimenting.

On my fourth and final day with them, I asked them to choose a childhood memory—good or bad—to write about in their childhood voice. I borrowed this idea from a writing assignment that I had in my own English class.

_Today daddy and mommy said that Jennifer and me were going to get a playhouse. I’m so happy! I asked mommy and daddy for a playhouse lots of yesterdays ago. Now I’m getting one! It will be my house to clean like mommy and to fix like daddy. I can play with my babies and not worry about Jennifer pulling off my barbie’s head because I can shut the door on her. She’s too little for a playhouse anyway._—Stephanie

Stephanie successfully found her “childhood” voice. This dictation and her use of the present tense effectively bring her memory to life, not only reflecting that sense of immediate timelessness Gerard defines as a quality of creative nonfiction, but also the characteristic narrative voice as well. In contrast, the following excerpt from Leigh’s childhood memory carries a more reflective tone—the use of the past tense contributes to this—with a narrative voice.
My sister Lynn loves trains. When I was three and she was four, we built trains with lawn chairs in our snowy Wisconsin driveway. When our first train was complete, it probably looked like five grungy old lawn chairs in a row, but to my sister and I, it was a beautiful masterpiece that was just as good, if not better, than any train on those “Thomas the Tank Engine” movies. We would invite dad to come out and take a ride in our one-of-a-kind, completely immobile train, and of course, he did not dare say no. We had our mom take pictures of us with our newest creation, and we planned everything around it. That night, we were very sad as we dismembered our train, and the chairs became heavy and ugly as we carried them into our garage.—Leigh

The next example shows us two distinct attitudes. Leslie shares both the naivété of her young perspective and the disenchantment of her slightly older point of view to create multiple layers of voice and meaning.

“Mom, will I ever be that big?” I used to wonder when picking my brother up from the school I used to call “Big Kid” school. I can remember the way I felt when I was a little girl, always looking up at bigger kids as if they were famous. It’s almost as if you’re in a rush to grow up, but when you reach the stage that you looked up to in the past, it’s not as great as it seems.—Leslie

Finally: personal, true, free. The exercise affirmed my belief that the kids really had the talent in them. These eighth-graders could write. They were beginning to understand that nonfiction could be as simple as telling their own stories. And they had plenty of those, as they had proven with the exercise on childhood memories.

I liked the childhood story the best because it was more personal than the other ones. I got to share something that really meant something to me with the class, and I got to hear some very interesting stories about people’s childhood memories. It was very easy for me because everything just flowed because I remembered it so well. My favorite part about writing is just letting ideas flow and not having to be picky about punctuation and grammar until I’m done.

Leigh seemed ready to try anything; she wrote for the adventure.

Whether the students wrote for the fun of it or the grade in it, they proved that they had the raw ability. Originally, I planned to focus my project more on what the high school English curriculum lacks in the area of creative writing, but I soon realized that this young talent was where the real story lay. I had come to these eighth-graders ready to uncover their enthusiasm for the art of nonfiction writing; I left with a hope that I had sparked a love for writing within them. Maybe their enthusiasm will last a week—maybe until their senior year in high school. Maybe it will diminish after their first formal essay assignment in freshman English. At least now they know there’s something more to nonfiction than the facts they find in textbooks.

And they are that something.

Works Cited


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