

Twenty Years, Twenty Stories

True Stories, Well Told: From the First Twenty Years of Creative Nonfiction Magazine edited by Lee Gutkind and Hattie Fletcher. Pittsburgh: In Fact, 2014. Paperback, 342 pp., \$15.95

Reviewed by Brian Gabriel, Concordia University, Canada

The first issue of *Creative Nonfiction* was published in 1994, and to celebrate its twenty years the magazine's editors chose twenty of its best for this collection of essays, memoirs, and reporting. The magazine, published quarterly, is a small but influential outlet for many writers, and, like any book of this kind, it likely gave the editors pause in trying to choose which stories to include here. In many respects these writings provide a spectrum of "creative nonfiction," a genre that resists definition. "Does it matter?" Susan Orlean asks in her introduction to the book, urging the reader to forget about defining what "creative nonfiction" is and instead focus on writing that is so "vividly" told "that you feel you are experiencing the story with me" (7). Of course, she makes this point, too: "Everything

in this is true." Thus, the reader takes for granted that the writers of these twenty stories have kept the truth end of the deal. And, as many of them demonstrate, they took great care to tell their stories with flair, care, and imagination. Some even pushed the boundaries of expected convention; many of the selections exhibit a lyrical, poetic sensibility. For example, in Meredith Hall's tale of self-exploration called "Without a Map," she writes, "The sun is warm. Behind me, I can hear the women and children talking and laughing as they eat and rest. Their voices rise in soft, floating prayers as I walk" (222).

Just as it might have been difficult for the editors to make choices about what to include in the collection, it is impossible for the reviewer to highlight all the essays worthy of comment. Overall, the book is a broad mix of writing styles and variety of subject matter, and, as the editors note, the genre itself is "flexible, allowing for plenty of experimentation in voice, style, subject matter, and structure" (12). One fascinating story, for example, tells of an author's struggle with the environmental pollution on her body while giving the reader a cautionary journalistic piece about industrial agriculture's effects on the gentlest of insects, the monarch butterfly. Another contends with a long-standing grudge against former American vice president Dick Cheney.

Memoir dominates, and, as in many memoirs, the writers tackle the life-changing, mostly sad events, in their lives that remain etched their memories. But not all



are sad, and one touching, short recollection (that made me smile) is about a father's happiest moment when he realizes that his little game of faux basketball with his children offers the best that life can give. Another, this time from a mother, is entitled "Rachel at Work." In it, she expresses the very nearly universal idea that every parent shares with every other parent: the hope that their children will be self-sustaining adults. In Jane Bernstein's case, her aspiration is to have her daughter learn how to make toast. Other parents write for seemingly cathartic purposes, as does Jim Kennedy in "End of the Line," his story of a father's helplessness in not being able to save his son. As Kennedy explained in an accompanying postscript, he found that he began writing one piece and ended up with another. "As the word count plummeted, the scope of the piece broadened and created surprises," he tells the reader (61).

Children also write about their parents. In Toi Derricotte's "Beds," she recalls a disturbing past that left emotional scars that never diminished. Derricotte speaks through the voice of a younger self, trying to make sense of an abusive father and trying to understand why those who are supposed to love us the most often inflict the most pain. By the end of the process of writing this down, she says, "I had worked myself around to a different way of seeing my past, and to a different relationship with my father. Rather than being his victim, I had made something that had a kind of truth, clarity, and beauty" (193).

Of all the stories, the one that stayed with me the longest is a doctor's tale by Paul Austin, which describes the effects of his choices on peoples' lives. In "Mrs. Kelly," Austin remembers how he told a patient, sitting in the ER with his wife, to go home, despite the apprehension in the wife's face. The man later died, and, as Austin explains, he soon looks for ways to rationalize his decision, which was neither wrong nor right. Down deep he knows made the wrong call despite the supportive words from those around him. Austin finally hopes Mrs. Kelly, the dead man's wife, can give him closure on this. He finally musters up the courage to call her and tries to explain and take responsibility for what happened. She will have none of it. The writer tells the reader that he must come to terms with "the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Kelly" that "is a source of sadness, still—a mild, dull ache in my chest. It feels like an echo, as if from a distance" (146). "Writing it wasn't therapeutic. Wasn't cathartic," Austin writes. "But it gave me the chance to safely spend time in that moment of being wrong" (146).

The final selection is also memoir and a history lesson about creative nonfiction. Lee Gutkind recalls his journey in trying to get *Creative Nonfiction* off the ground and why it needed to be launched. "Never did I intend to start a magazine or pioneer a literary movement—or any movement whatsoever," he writes (291). Gutkind recounts the culture wars enveloping New Journalism and literary journalism back in the 1960s and 1970s. In his view, the disputes never ended, even though the "gang that wouldn't write straight" had established the bona fides of literary nonfiction. As Gutkind tells it, his academic department would neither support nor acknowledge this kind of writing, so he took on the challenge to defend the "idea that you could be literary and journalistic at the same time, that *creative* and *nonfiction* can stand together as a concept and a practice" (309). According to Gutkind, his enemies lived

outside his university, notably major critics like James Wolcott being dismissive of the whole idea of creative nonfiction. In Gutkind's view, creative nonfiction has earned the respectability he long sought. "In the end," he writes, "it is our stories that define us to the world at large and to ourselves" (342). The stories here do just that.
