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Telling the Truth That Matters

When creative nonfiction writers tell a story more than one way, readers get suspicious. "Well, which is true?" they ask, as if you've betrayed nonfiction and "creative" really means fiction. Not so if you are Edouard Manet, I decided at the Museum of Modern Art, standing before his three giant paintings of the execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico in 1867. Each canvas included a firing squad, rifles taking aim, and one man looking away, but other "facts" and the mood they evoked kept changing.

In the first painting, dark, impressionistic and chaotic, a cluster of scruffy men, some in sombreros, fire in a field or forest half-lit by gun smoke. In the second, the gun smoke is gone, its color reappearing in distant clouds while, in the foreground, soldiers in gray uniforms with white belts take aim on a clear day. In the third painting, the gun smoke returns, weaving like a scarf around the necks of three men being executed. Now the setting is a stadium. Now clarity replaces chaos. Now peasants, in mid-canvas, lean over the rim of the stadium's wall, as witnesses, and behind them a cemetery sits high in the background.

The people who packed this exhibit seemed unconcerned by discrepancy. They were absorbing each painting as a total experience, letting one sink in before the next one took over. I would have done the same if I hadn't been thinking about truth telling in creative nonfiction and its relationship to the accuracy of small details. Does it matter, for example, if you can't remember your second grade teacher's dress (even as you imagine it red. Or was it blue)? That became a topic of lengthy debate on one panel about ethical dilemmas at the 2007 Nonfiction Now Writers' Conference, held in Iowa. Post James Frey, the voices of "No" (the poets) and "Yes" (the journalists), always squabbling about variations on this issue, have become strident in defending what they think true is.

Yet at the MOMA, looking up at Manet's three canvases, "Which is true?" seemed beside the point. Each version felt authentic, persuasive,

and true—even as the angle of vision kept shifting, along with the soldiers' outfits, the lighting, the place of execution, and who was watching. What mattered was the emotional power created, successively, by an artist whose concern for this major political event of his day was, in Manet's words, more for "expressing the temporal moment than recording a historically accurate depiction of it." His sense of that moment shifted over time (the paintings were done over several years), and so the colors, movement, light, and what was in the foreground and background also shifted. Had it not, I would have been looking at two drafts of a final rendering, not three moments of one true story revisited.

YES, we say to our Manets, giving permission, even demanding, the alchemy of imagination and fact to recreate history visually, as art. YES we also say to our poets, fiction writers, and playwrights, although the more distant the history, the easier we grant "poetic" license. Shakespeare gets a pass when his *Macbeth* differs from its source, *The Hollingshead Chronicle*; but Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, about a secret meeting in 1941 between scientists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Boer, makes us more uneasy. The drama is first-rate, no one argues about that, but "Did it really happen that way?" I heard more than once during intermission. "Is that why we got the atomic bomb before the Nazis?"

Even poets may be challenged on accuracy. The fact checker of *The New Yorker* gave Stephen Dunn a hard time about his poem "Economics and the Origin of Words" when he couldn't verify the details about English burial practices that he found on the Internet:

> …One out of thirty coffins, though,
> had scratch marks on the inside;
> they'd been burying people alive.
>
> It made good sense
> to put a string around those limp wrists,
> lead it up through coffin and ground
> and tie it to a bell. Someone then

had to sit in the graveyard all night —
a good job, you'd think, for the Middle Ages
equivalent of a retiree.
Thus he worked "the graveyard shift,"

and a few people actually were "saved
by the bell," or became "dead ringers."
But in fact the jobs went to terrified boys,
quick to shovel when that bell clanged.

The poem was published, but in the *American Poetry Review*.

The most tentative YES is given to creative nonfiction writers, trying to carve out the turf between journalism and fiction by combining reportage with storytelling techniques. Even personal history can set off a firestorm, as Vivian Gornick discovered at a talk she gave at Goucher College about memoir. Her remarks during the Q and A that conversations with her mother in *Fierce Attachments* were rearranged and condensed "to move the narrative along" were enough to make *Salon* magazine and NPR pick up the story. They did not assume, as Manet did, that the artist's allegiance—unlike the journalist's—is to capturing "the temporal truth" as he or she experiences it. Gornick, amazed by the fuss, repeated that all she had said was: "On occasion I made a composite out of the elements of two or more incidents, none of which had been fabricated…." As a memoirist, she felt her commitment to truth was the obligation to get, as honestly as possible, "to the bottom of the experience at hand." Manet would certainly agree, with a hearty second from Henri Matisse. In his essay, "Exactitude is not the Truth," Matisse argues that the surface of facts can often clutter and obscure—and the artist must go deeper: "There exists an essential truth that must be disengaged from the outward appearance of the objects represented. This is the only Truth that matters."

Creative nonfiction writers, I want to argue, need the same freedom to discover "the Truth that matters." They too must move beyond an over-

allegiance to reportage that blocks the imagination from finding the essential truths. To do that, they may shift, like Manet, what's in the foreground and the background—and recolor the light of the day. And they may revisit the same landscape more than once, looking, as Manet did, for new discoveries.

Our best writers find them, as Scott Russell Sanders shows in two essays involving his childhood and his father. In the first, "Under the Influence," Sanders shines a harsh light on his father's drinking and its effect on his family. In the second, "Reasons of the Body," he recreates, with empathy and nostalgia, their good relationship playing basketball during those same years. Here's the opening of "Under the Influence":

> My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother's trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue so long as memory holds.
> In the perennial present of memory, I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags. His Adam's apple bobs, the liquid gurgles, he wipes the sandy-haired back of a hand over his lips, and then, his bloodshot gaze bumping into me, he stashes the bottle or can inside his jacket… and we both pretend the moment has not occurred.

In Sanders' second essay, the father who guzzled "flat green bottles" is now coaching basketball in a driveway outside the garage:

> … He had taught me how to dribble, how to time my jump, how to follow through on my shots. To begin with, I could barely heave the ball to the basket, and he would applaud if I so much as banged the rim. I banged away, year by year, my bones lengthening, muscles

> thickening. I shuffled over the concrete to the jazz of bird song and the opera of thunderstorms…. [And then] There came a day when I realized that I could out-leap him, out-hustle and outshoot him. I began to notice his terrible breathing, terrible because I had not realized he could run short of air. I had not realized that he could run short of anything. When he bent over and grabbed his knees, huffing, "You're too much for me," I felt at once triumphant and dismayed.

Alcoholism, like Manet's gun smoke, practically disappears in this essay. It recedes from foreground to background, being mentioned only once in half of one sentence that begins: "In his sober hours and years, which are the hours and years I measure him by…" And yet this father-son account—set in the same time period and in almost the same place—feels as authentic and true as the first.

Such shifts in details, mood, and angle of vision are how we challenge the easy labels we are prone to stick on the past, particularly on family members—the mean father, the bitchy sister, the sweet grandmother—and make new inroads into understanding. I have my students read Sanders' two essays to show them that they can write about the same people in the same time frame without getting emotionally stuck in one worn groove of memory.

Manet's three paintings were also shaped by the factual information available. In early news reports, no one knew who did the firing or where, and the mood of chaos is reflected in the dim light of confusion. Later, as reports came from more sources—newspapers, letters, drawings, and diaries—there was more to work with. New details led to new imaginings that led to a new insight of the moment.

We are all relearning our stories, if we are open to that and refuse the Johnny-one-note impulse of storytelling. I'm thinking of my mother when I say that, the last of my parents' generation to know family stories about life in Germany before coming here.

"What was it like as a child?" I'd ask.

"Did I tell you how I fell off my bicycle and broke my nose?"

"What was it like fleeing Germany?"

"Did I tell you about the time the Gestapo came at night for the man upstairs?"

I got to know the answer before I asked the question. She never wanted to go beyond that, never wanted one memory to contradict the next—or worse, lead to an unexpected one. It was too dangerous. Who knew what might surface? No matter what new information arrived, I suspect that my mother would tell the execution of Maximillian the same way every time.

That is why, when I tried to retrieve my family's past while researching my book, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village*, I turned to strangers: thirty or so of my father's former neighbors remembering one little German village before, during, and after Nazi times. The same images appeared—the burning synagogue, the rescued Torah, linzertorte, the black swastika, the white cross. And the same echoes of memory: "We all got along…Decent people…Terrible times… What could they do?…What could we do?"—but the foreground and background of the story kept shifting. Sometimes a piece of story disappeared only to resurface three interviews later, or not. Sometimes facts contradicted each other. And sometimes part of one story broke off, scattering into different stories that, collectively, would coalesce again many memories later. As a story gatherer, not a journalist or a historian, I liked that. I liked how the waters of truth muddied with each telling—and its mix of chaos and clarity. I wanted to capture that mix, and also the way one story bumped against another, challenging and informing what I knew or didn't know until fact, myth, and memory merged into something to hold onto.

Usually an inner urge makes us revisit the same story, to get it right, yet again. But sometimes, as with Max Apple, the catalyst can be external and have good results. A short essay about his grandfather in *The New York Times Magazine* led to a movie studio requesting a screenplay, which led to a book-length memoir. All three were called "Roommates," all were about his grandfather who lived with Max when Max was a child, and later a grad student at the University of Michigan, and even later (his grandfather was

then 104) when Max had a very sick wife and two small kids.

The first, a 1,200-word essay, "was the purest form," says Apple. "My grandfather had died a few years before and I was filled with longing for him." The second, the screenplay, was a fictionalized version of the story, Apple found out *after* signing the movie contract. For the studio wanted Max, the writer, to become Max, the doctor—and his grandfather, an Orthodox Jew to his core, to become a Gentile. The screenplay took four years and was the hardest to write. Partly, says Apple, because of the form: "Screenwriting isn't made for writers. Words don't matter as much as tone set by music and images, so what makes literature 'literature' is not there." But mostly, the challenge was "to take the passion of the essay about my grandpa, turn him into someone else's grandpa, and still feel the same about him." To his surprise, Apple liked the movie despite the fictionalized parts, because Peter Falk who played his grandfather "had instinctively captured the essence of the man I loved." There on the screen, evidently, Max saw the Truth that mattered.

The memoir *Roommates* came last, "the quickest book I ever wrote because it was all there, buried." The scenes he had no room for in the movie or short essay—especially involving his wife and children—found their home. The opening chapter, for Apple, gave him the greatest pleasure: the courtship with his wife at the university: "It was so wonderful to have Debbie again, not the Debbie who was sick for so many years, but the Debbie who was lively, funny, wonderful. I wanted the kids to have that, their mother before the doctors, the nurses, and all the sadness." In the movie, she didn't have MS; she was killed in a car crash. The studio insisted because they wanted to move the narrative along. But, unlike in Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, that involved more than condensing facts; it meant making them up.

There was no public flack about the movie "Roommates," because there were no nonfiction expectations as with "A Beautiful Mind," a movie about the mathematical genius, John Nash. Many came to the movie assuming it was biography and felt betrayed by the movie's poetic license. Schizophrenics don't actually see their delusions. The Nobel Prize ceremony

in Stockholm happened differently. The ritual giving of the pen by Princeton University's Math Department never happened. One math professor who knew Nash in those days confirmed the movie's invention of that ritual: "No, we didn't do that…" he told me, but then his eyes lighted up. "But I wish we had! It was such a nice tradition." I sided with the math professor and all those who loved the movie. To me it was about a troubled genius struggling with insanity: that was the truth that mattered. But I can understand the other position and the angry confusion over historic accuracy. *Did it really happen that way?* When a public figure's story is involved, there is more urgency to know.

Carol Spindel in her essay "When Ambiguity Becomes Deception: The Ethics of Memoir" talks about the issue of accuracy versus truth—and how, in memoir, ambiguity just won't go away: first, because what the "I" remembers may differ from what others remember; second, because of the needs of craft: to select and shape events so that they are not merely a string of and-then-this-happened events. To achieve that, some writers compress time and make composite characters; others oppose that. The question for writers of repute is not intent, Spindel writes. "We all agree about truth but some are more wedded to accuracy than others." The best solution, she argues, is "spelling out the compact" to let readers know what you are doing, the way Ruth Reichl does in her introduction to *Tender at the Bone*:

> This book is absolutely in the family tradition. Everything here is true, but it may not be entirely factual. In some cases I have compressed events; in others I have made two people into one. I have occasionally embroidered. I learned early that the most important thing in life is a good story."

I've found, personally, that what Spindel calls "truth in literary labeling" is usually enough to keep the reader's trust. As a reader, I had no problems with Kathy Davidson's composites in *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, especially when she gave her reason in the introduction: that she wanted to preserve the privacy of the people who trusted her to do so. As a writer I followed

suit. In both my memoirs, I let readers know early on that I changed names and identifying details of people and occasionally of places to protect the privacy of the non-famous. Very few have complained.

In each of Manet's three paintings, one man is *not* shooting his gun. He wears a sombrero in one painting, a soldier's cap in the others. He has a moustache twice, once not. But always he stands apart, holding his rifle as if he is not ready or not willing to fire. Initially, I left him out of this essay, thinking *Too much description!* and *Not that important!* Then, after restudying the three paintings several times, I realized he was central to each version, so I added the phrase "one man looking away" to paragraph two. Now I realize that this man must end this essay. He has moved to the foreground of my story because he represents the struggle of creative nonfiction writers to decide what we may and may not leave out—if we want to write true to the experience. When I write fiction, there's more leeway because I make up the world. I own the whole story. But I don't own Manet's art, which I've made central to this nonfiction essay. And the man who stands apart, the one I initially thought inconsequential, is central to Manet. I have the obligation to make room for him, to make him my own, if my intent is to "get to the bottom of the experience" as Gornick says, and be a writer that honors the marriage of 'creative' *and* 'nonfiction.' The coupling of these words is the big draw and the big challenge of the genre: to leave the messiness of real life in everything and then deal with it, no matter how many ways we tell one story.