

Tyrant or Beacon: The State of Narrative in Contemporary Creative Nonfiction

Description:

Is narrative in creative nonfiction a tyrannical form that needs to be obliterated, or is it a path to clarity? Storytelling is giving way more and more these days to the fragments, gaps, and associative leaps of lyric essays. This panel of memoirists, personal essayists, and lyric essayists will discuss the impulses that bring them to the page in an attempt to better understand the value of narrative's presence, or absence, particularly when the world outside the essay resists causality.

Statement of Merit:

Many essayists like David Shields are critical of narrative's insistence on cause and effect in a seemingly illogical world. Indeed, more fractured and associative forms have become increasingly popular among contemporary essayists. But what about the value of narrative even in forms that resist causality? This panel's conversation about the merits and deficiencies of storytelling in creative nonfiction is necessary to our better understanding of the essay as a mode of inquiry and discovery.

Panelists:

Harrison Candelaria Fletcher is the author of the award winning *Descanso For My Father: Fragments of a Life* and *Presentimiento: A Life in Dreams*. His essays and prose poems have appeared widely in journals and anthologies. He teaches at Colorado State University and Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Bonnie Friedman is the author of the books *Writing Past Dark*, *The Thief of Happiness*, and *Surrendering Oz: A Life in Essays*, longlisted for the PEN award in the Art of the Essay. Her work has appeared in *The Best American Movie Writing*, *The Best Writing on Writing*, and *The Best Buddhist Writing*.

Lee Martin is the author of four novels, including the Pulitzer Prize Finalist, *The Bright Forever*. He is also the author of three memoirs, most recently *Such a Life*, and two story collections. He teaches in the creative writing program at The Ohio State University.

Kyoko Mori is the author of three nonfiction books (*The Dream of Water*; *Polite Lies*; *Yarn*) and four novels (*Shizuko's Daughter*; *One Bird*; *Stone Field*, *True Arrow*; *Barn Cat*). She teaches creative writing at George Mason University and for the Low-Residency MFA Program at Lesley University.

Lia Purpura authored 9 collections (essays, poems, and translations) most recently, *All the Fierce Tethers* (essays.) Her awards include Guggenheim, NEA, and Fulbright Fellowships, and four

Pushcarts. *On Looking* (essays) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She teaches at UMBC.

Subjects and Questions the Panel Will Explore:

What is the state of narrative in contemporary creative nonfiction? What about the value of narrative even in forms that resist causality?

David Shields says, “The absence of plot leaves the reader room to think about other things.” Isn’t that (those other things) also narrative?

Are there certain insights that can only (or predominantly) be arrived at under the pressure of a cohesive, linear narrative (even if occasionally this narrative thread vanishes for a time beneath white space)? Does the linearity of a relatively non-associative and perhaps purposely unflinching inquiry allow a certain kind of discovery to manifest itself while other forms of essaying make this particular kind of discovery more difficult to achieve?

Paul Klee said “A drawing is simply a line going for a walk.” Meandering can provide depth experiences, necessary context, and slow-time exploration.

Narrative in nonfiction may be looser, more flexible, than the traditional understanding of what narrative is (from fiction, even though, of course, fictional narrative doesn’t have to be all that strict, either). How can essayists expand the notion of what narrative is? How is storytelling different from and more than “plot” especially in nonfiction?”