Feral Turkeys & Dog Poop Bags:

No Subject is too Strange for Creative Nonfiction

Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Writing and publishing short creative nonfiction for magazines and newspapers trains us to be mindful of the small, strange events in our life and turn them into compelling stories. Feral turkeys uniting a neighborhood at dusk? Growing up in a museum with beer bottle walls? Hundreds of abandoned dog waste bags on hiking trails during the pandemic? We wrote about them all, and editors and readers were thrilled! We'll explain how to write & publish in a similar fashion.

Event Organizer/Moderator: Melissa Hart

Melissa Hart is contributing editor at The Writer Magazine, and teaches for Southern New Hampshire University's MFA program. Her essays have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, The Los Angeles Times, HuffPost & The Advocate. She's the author of five books. www.melissahart.com

Event Participants

Tanya Ward Goodman is the author of the award winning memoir, "Leaving Tinkertown." Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous publications including The Los Angeles Times, Coast Magazine, Luxe, Fourth River and The Washington Post. She is working on a second memoir.

Michael Copperman teaches writing to diverse students at the University of Oregon. His prose has appeared in The Oxford American, Guernica, Boston Review, Creative Nonfiction, Gulf Coast, and The Sun. His memoir, TEACHER, was a finalist for the Oregon Book Awards in Creative Nonfiction.

J**ordan Rosenfeld** is author of six books on writing, most recently How to Write a Page-Turner and the bestselling Make a Scene, Her essays and articles have

appeared in such places as The Atlantic, The Rumpus, New York Magazine, Scientific American, the Washington Post and more. She edits and teaches

Melissa I'm Melissa Hart, contributing editor at The Writer Magazine, and author of several nonfiction books, essays, and magazine and newspapers articles. I'm actually responsible for this title; during the pandenic I wrote about how a flock of feral turkeys united my neighbors for City Creatures, and about the multitudes of dog poop bags abandoned on hiking trails for The Bark Magazine.

We're here today to share our stories of writing and publication on topics which might strike some of you as unusual, even weird . . . like my essay about training a Snowy owl at the local raptor center, a bird who tried to mate with my white sneakers. We hope you'll be inspired to value your stranger interests and experiences and write about them for readers who will likely be delighted with your stories.

The panelists will introduce themselves, along with their latest book, and the strangest topic they've written about for publication.

8:05 Tanya introduces self

8:09 Jordan introduces self

8:13 Mike introduces self

8:17 **Melissa asks Tanya, "your memoir, *Leaving Tinkertown*, focuses on your father who made his living painting carnival signs and raised you in Tinkertown Museum, a "roadside attraction in rural New Mexico whose walls were made of beer bottles." How did you go about deciding which strange details to include about your father, your house, and yourself as a child in this unusual setting?**

8:18 Tanya: Because the “now” of my memoir is defined by the five years between my father’s diagnosis with early onset Alzheimer’s and his death, I looked to the museum for imagery and metaphor that would illuminate elements of the story. The museum itself is a kind of sibling that grew up alongside me. I thought about Dad’s influence on the place – how he built it, what it meant to him – and about his influence on me. What did I embrace and what did I need to leave behind? Just after I moved home, I painted the walls of my childhood bedroom and left them bare of decoration. Because the house is incredibly packed with Dad’s collections, art and memorabilia, I felt like I needed to carve out space that was mine. Dad was thrilled to find these empty walls and every chance he got, would hang new art in my room. I would come home and take it down. And he’d put it back up. Writing this into the book was a way to reflect on my need for clarity and independence as well as a way to reveal the loops of Dad’s forgetting. To him, every day began to look like that empty room.

Dad’s art is everywhere in the book. His habit of doodling gave him a voice even when he was deep in aphasia and his paintings offered a way to open introspective sections about my family, particularly my stepmother, Carla. A portrait of her inspired an interrogation of the boundaries of the father/daughter relationship and the barriers of intimacy that added to the difficulty of caring for my father.

Dad’s diagnosis shifted the foundation of my life. Throughout the book, I tried to show the ways I had always worked to create a base of my own. The moonboots and hand-me-downs I wore as a mountain kid inspired longings for patent leather Mary Janes and plaid skirts. I lobbied to trade

the hippie co-op school of my early childhood public elementary with rows of neat desks. Throughout the book, (and throughout my life) I've tried to find a path toward feeling comfortable in the world while pursuing my own creative urges. The need to diverge from the trail carved by my father mirrored my need to take a step back from full time caregiving in order to begin my own family.

The museum itself provided a perfect metaphor on every level. The relentlessness of Dad's desire to build mimicked the onslaught of the disease, and the way his walls cut off light to the house reflects the way plaques and tangles take over the brain. During Dad's illness, he continued to build bottle walls, often right in front of a window. I built with him during the day and, in the evening, would take down a few rows to let the light back in. The next day, we would start all over again. When Dad stopped recognizing Tinkertown, we understood that a crucial part of him had been lost and it was no longer in his best interests to be at home. Walking through the museum is akin to walking through my father's brain and heart. The way it keeps his spirit alive inspired me to write a book with the same aim. I couldn't let Alzheimer's get the last word.

8:22 **Melissa asks Mike: The subjects in your creative nonfiction are less strange than surprising and compelling, particularly in your book-length memoir and related essays. *Creative Nonfiction* published your piece "Harm" in issue 48, the "Southern Sin" issue, and I found many details to be both unexpected and thought-provoking. How did you go about choosing which anecdotes and images to include to familiarize readers with your childhood and your**

father, and with the particular region of Mississippi in which you taught?

8:23 Mike: Thanks so much for the question, Melissa! I swear, I have actually written about strange and absurd things—like cutting weight in wrestling, or my love of the Outkast song Rosa Parks and how it became a part of the fabric of my daily teaching experience back in Mississippi because I listened to it every morning on the three minute drive to school across the black side of the tracks—but I suppose the through line for me, whether the subject is the strange or absurd or the pedestrian and daily is thatI have to care deeply about the subject even if others don't, that I need to have something at stake in the writing that is something I don't yet understand or have an answer to that itself may not be answerable or resolvable. I tend to think that the point of narrative and lyric art, especially the art of nonfiction, is to correctly pose a question, not answer it.

The closest I come to finding an answer is that what I write must cost me something and so requires that I discover something about myself or about the world around me that is felt. The writing is not planned out or even necessarily 'intentional' that way that most people think of that word, because the choices of what I write and how I write is a part of an unconscious or subconscious discovery of meaning. I use all the tools of craft I possess and a process I've practiced to try to get to a place I do not know how to name.

That is probably both far too self-serious and defiantly literary a practice—it certainly sounds fatally uncommercial in a 2022 where everything is platform, influencers, branding and TikTok dances—so

perhaps there's a reason I'm not on the NYT Bestseller's list! But it's what I do.

And so, to answer the question about what anecdotes and images I use in what is one of the most difficult chapters of my memoir "Teacher," about the two years I taught fourth grade in the rural black public schools of the MS Delta, what I wanted to do, first was attempt to reckon with the worst of what I'd done when I was young and idealistic and completely failing as a teacher. I'd found myself complicit in abusive and inhumane systems and practices that did consistent harm to children I'd imagined I'd come to help—so much so that often, I wouldn't allow myself to remember.

In the case of the nine year old girl I was writing about, who was my favorite but who was also constantly defying me and cussing me out. I called her home and told her step-father that she was acting out—and so he brought her to my classroom and beat her with her own belt while I stood by powerlessly. I had asked for it, so to speak. And nobody considered it a problem, including my principal.

To explain that experience, though, required more than what I myself had experienced. And so I was surprised to find myself turning first toward the river teeth of early memory and writing about my father, a family doctor and one of the kindest, gentlest men I know.

I'd witnessed my father lose his temper once, after some boys threw rocks at him while he was running, and put them in an Aikido hold. And I found myself telling a story he'd told me, about why he left residency at the VA hospital in Long Beach—how he'd been losing himself dealing with addicts and bad drunks, how he'd tied a mean drunk to a gurney one night and left him there a while, how when he'd returned and the man was

distraught he knew he had to leave, that he was violating the only oath he'd made—do no harm. He'd known then that he was losing himself, that he had reached a limit. Juxtaposing his story, making his experiences speak to mine, allowed me to reckon with the violence I had been complicit in, and to also understand, as I'd come to from my father's story, that there is no expiating my guilt, that there is no such thing as atonement, that we cannot ever undo past harm-- but we *can* strive to be better.

8:27 **Melissa asks Jordan: You've written creative nonfiction on a wide range of subjects, describing a brief stint as a kleptomaniac, and your mother's breasts and why you plan to hover when your son becomes a teen. Tell us about a couple of the strangest subjects you've written about, and how editors have reacted during your submission process.**

8:28 Jordan—Thanks, Melissa. First of all, I feel the need to defend that I was in elementary school during my Klepto phase ;-) I think to start, I'm always asking two questions when writing essays: One, has this story already been told in a thousand ways and does the world need to hear my take on it? Two, what is new, original, or surprising about it? And for me a common kernel in essay writing is to take on my secrets and my shame, because that's a place of hidden gems, a place I think we are often afraid to mine because we want to control how people see us. For me, as a reader, the pieces that move me most are the ones where the writer reveals some messy, scary, sad human part of themselves and I can relate, or I feel seen or less alone because of it.

In addition to those topics you mention I've had the pleasure of writing what you might consider squeamish topics for Mental Floss, through a scientific lens, about various body parts or functions. My two favorites are "Why is Poop Brown"—aimed at kids, and about the functions of the anus—like, these are topics nobody wants to discuss, right, you'd think…except both pieces garnered incredible reader responses. I think the secret is that what we consider taboo, or not fit for society, so to speak, are actually the very things many of us do want to talk about, or at least know about, but rarely have a public space to do so. So getting to write about those things feels very freeing and fun and it brings people together.

As for the essay about my mother, it's about more than her breasts, actually—it's an essay exploring the confusing messages about sexuality and the body that I got growing up, and how having a child--pregncy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, in particular--helped me reconcile some of them. But it felt very transgressive to me to write because I was talking about, again, quote-unquote shameful things in my family—that my parents didn't hide their sexual activities from me, or draw a lot of boundaries around their and my bodies (I'm not talking about sexual abuse here), and that had a very profound impact on me as a person that took decades to unpack.

Ultimately, though many of these topics have been odd or hot button, I've never had an editor say: "Wow, how could you possibly suggest this strange topic?" because if anything, editors tend to perk up at the idea of publishing something a little taboo. In fact, I think with the advent of the

“clickbait” headline, editors are even looking specifically for this kind of work.

I think there’s just power in writing into what scares you a little, or what you’ve never been able to articulate, and I think you’ll be amazed to find there’s an audience for it.

8:32 Melissa asks Tanya—you publish creative nonfiction travel pieces. How does the concept of “strange” figure into your travel writing? Tell us about some of the stranger details you’ve incorporated into your pieces--I’m thinking about your article for The Washington Post in July 2020 titled “In a virtual escape room, a family finds clues for getting through the pandemic,” but I’d love to know about others, as well.

8:33 Tanya: I don’t usually think of things as “strange.” I just kind of follow a thread of curiosity and serendipity. I always go into writing the way I might enter a dinner party conversation -- looking for linking ideas and surprise connections. Deep in the 2020 lockdown, a friend mentioned “The Virus,” an escape room with a pandemic theme and I immediately wanted to know more about the creator. Bob Glauberman turned out to be a compulsive escape room fan with a fear of germs who’d come up with an experience that mirrored almost exactly the one we were living through. In fact, his website was so realistic that he was getting calls from people looking for information about Covid-19. Though he'd closed The Virus escape room,

he had turned his second enterprise, “The Experiment” into a virtual experience. It was built, like The Virus, around his worst fears. On the day I spoke to him, the actress Naya Rivera had drowned, leaving her son alone in a boat. This terrible story paralleled almost exactly the set-up of “The Experiment.” I opened my conversation with Glauberman by wondering if he could predict the future. We talked at length about our pandemic worries and the brevity of what Mary Oliver refers to as our “one wild and precious life.” I was struck by his use of Oliver’s poem as a clue in the escape room. Our conversation covered the “privilege” of paying for the experience of being locked in a room, the way male participants often interrupt or ignore suggestions from their female partners, and the limitations of a virtual experience. As I wrote I couldn’t help but think about the relationship between mothers and sons, the differing communication styles of men and women, and the way our home had become its own a kind of escape room, with each of us falling into a particular role as we tried to make sense of the situation. I wrote about my rapidly maturing son, my longing to see friends in person, my feelings about housework, and the way the pandemic had helped me find my voice. If I had to map the finished piece, I could trace each of these ideas back to the game and to my conversation with Glauberman, but I don’t think I could have outlined it from the beginning.

It helps me to have a guiding image – even if it doesn’t actually appear in the finished piece. In a recent Washington Post travel article, my visit to the Velaslavasay Panorama in Los Angeles sparked a contemplation of obscure museums and attractions. At the panorama, visitors go down a dark hall and climb a narrow, spiral staircase, which opens into a 360 degree, three-dimensional mural. The experience of compression into

expansion is one I kept in mind as I moved from an interview with a small museum expert who believes in old roadmaps and word of mouth, to a discussion with the co-founder of the very large, very user-friendly Atlas Obscura.

I'm always on the lookout for specific details: things that jog my memory, prompt a story or offer a lens on the experience. So many things -- Troll dolls, Edna St. Vincent Millay, the concept of duality, Forever Young orchids, scorpions, rope bridges, poisonous plants – they're all portals in their own way.

8:37 **Melissa asks Mike,** last September, you taught a prose workshop for Creative Nonfiction Foundation on how to use verb tense to "enable retrospection and reflection," allowing "the past to be considered from the vantage point of the present." Tell us how a couple of your favorite writers have used verb tense in specific works to highlight and heighten the stakes of a situation they've encountered and even to emphasize the true nature of the meaning of a scene. How can emerging creative nonfiction writers use verb tense to add unexpected elements to their prose?

8:38 Mike: First, I want to credit the essayist/memoirist Scott Russell Sanders, whose workshop was responsible for most of my ideas about tense. Tense, of course, tells us when we are in an essay—and effectively allows us to be time-travelers, juggling many whens while keeping a reader oriented, while at the same time maintaining a sort of double perspective, that is, of writing of past events from a much later point of view when what

the past has come to mean and signify is now clear. The primary meaning-making engine of pieces written from one's own past experiences is retrospection—an angle of vision that lets us write about what happened while at the same time understanding now far more than we did when those events happened, so that we are able to allow a reader to understand what we couldn't.

Sanders contended that the simplest way of enabling this perspective was to write about past events in the past tense, saving ourselves the present tense for reflection or a current timeline if one exists. Let me show you an example, as best I can, of the possibilities that controlling tense give us, to move in time without disorientation, and to both arrange and write scenes in a way that makes them legible and felt AND to reflect on what those events meant. Consider this brief passage from a young Portland writer Megan Kerns, whose essay "This is East Tennessee Punk Rock," appears in the recent anthology Best Creative Nonfiction. The piece is about a time, in her early twenties, when she was a four-time college dropout working dead-end jobs who didn't believe in herself or know how to take up space in the world—except that somehow, she became the lead singer of a punk rock band in a small town in East Tennessee. This passage I'm going to quickly read comes after she has just finished her first performance—in fact, just to show you what I mean about "time travel", I'm going to read a little here to set up what's happening. See if you can follow all the ways she moves in perspective and in time, using tense to offer perspective and reflection:

8:42 Melissa asks Jordan What advice do you have for emerging creative nonfiction writers who feel like the subjects they're writing about might be too strange for publication?

8: 43 **Jordan** I think first begin with an interrogation of yourself, why do you feel that it's "too strange"? Is it because it's a topic you've never shared with anyone or are you bound by some inner shame? Is it something that presses up against people's judgments or some inner voice from your past telling you not to share that? Are you afraid of coming off in a less than positive light?

Because even in asking those questions you may get more material for the piece or clarity about what's holding you back. Second, I think with all writing that feels vulnerable or nerve wracking, you should write it with the idea that you never have to show it to anyone. Do whatever you need to give yourself permission to get it out, because there's personal value in writing these things. And every piece of writing can open doors to others.

Then, if you feel brave, find one person you trust, someone you know will not shame you or tell you it's crap or to stop, to read it. Test the waters that way.

Or you can be like me and jump in with both feet and deal with your vulnerability hangover later.

Ultimately, I'd say, trust that if you are interested in it, find it worthy, or are compelled to write it, I'll bet there is someone else who needs to hear it too. Better out than in!

We each solicited questions from our social media contacts regarding this topic; here's the first question. Panel, feel free to answer it as you see fit!

Q. Here's my question: how do you take an essay on a particularly unusual (or maybe a super mundane topic) and make it memorable but not gimmicky? I'm thinking back to a New Yorker article that I read years ago about disposable diapers that was absolutely fascinating--and this was before I was a parent and cared anything at all about diapers.

Q. How do you keep readers engaged on a far out topic that they might not understand?

Q. How do you handle sourcing for niche nonfiction topics, when experts may be few and far between -- do you reuse interviews with one source for multiple articles?