

When Macaroni and Cheese Is Good Enough:
Revelation in Creative Nonfiction.

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During a meeting of the Special Interest Group in Creative Nonfiction at the 2002 College Composition and Communication Conference, an audience member posed a question that began with a complaint: her students were choosing "trivial" topics for their creative nonfiction assignments. She knew they had "juicier" stories to tell but she didn't know how to get them to "dig deeper." "How do I get them to do that?" she asked.

I admit when I first heard this question, I winced at the implication behind it: that an essential goal of creative nonfiction instruction is to help students write "juicier" (a.k.a. "confessional") prose. Although many memorable examples of creative nonfiction do emerge from "juicy" life stories, many others begin on, of, or about the most seemingly trivial subjects. What makes these latter essays equally memorable is not so much what they tell but the way in which they tell. As Joyce Carol Oates (1991: xxii) suggests, "in the most brilliant essays, language is not merely the medium of communication; it *is* communication." To some extent, that's why creative nonfiction can be such an appealing genre for students straddling the grand old age of twenty. Even those who have lived the most ordinary lives can make literary language of the most ordinary matters. How deeply our students dig into their material depends not only on their desire to dig but on the tools they have with them at this point in their lives. The success of their efforts also depends largely on their ability to gather others to peer into their excavation sites. Some students will spend the entire semester bulldozing; others will barely scratch the surface. Our goal as creative nonfiction instructors is to offer our students various tools for digging and to help them translate *their* discoveries for their readers. What we seek is not so much the profound or the packaged as the genuine (and genuinely appealing).

That creative nonfiction pedagogy places so much emphasis on revelation—"self-discovery, self-exploration, and surprise" (Root and Steinberg 2002: xxv)—is not itself a surprise. Introspection is an inherent part of the genre, as is what Robert Root and Michael Steinberg (2002: xxiv) label "personal presence"—that manner of voice that announces the existence of a real person behind the piece, whether the subject is self or something else like [End Page 316] old china, headaches, idleness, or hate. As Joseph Epstein (1993: xv) puts it: "Without that strong personal presence, the essay doesn't quite exist; it becomes an article, a piece, or some other indefinable verbal construction. Even when the subject seems a distant and impersonal one, the self of the writer is in good part what the essay is about." Thus, not only do we use "personal presence" to define the genre of creative nonfiction, we use it to define creative nonfiction against other genres (poetry, fiction, drama) and against the umbrella genre of nonfiction. Furthermore, when we ask students to examine the history of creative nonfiction, we often point to Michel de Montaigne, the so-called father of the modern essay, and stress the novelty of Montaigne's project, namely, his self-revelation. "I am myself the matter of my book," Montaigne declares in the prefatory remarks to his *Essais* (1958: 2). Our students appreciate writers like Montaigne, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Robert Louis Stevenson because they sense personal presence breaking through old ideas and language otherwise inaccessible to their contemporary sensibilities. Historically, then, revelation—"self-study," "self-exploration," "self-disclosure," or whatever name we attach to that concept of finding a (written) self—has always been an essential component of creative nonfiction. Encouraging students to embark on similar journeys of self-discovery is not necessarily bad pedagogy. Implementing that pedagogy can be maddening, however, when students resist self-disclosure or when self-disclosure becomes both the means and end of the writing process. The (false) assumption behind such a pedagogical...

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