

LEE GUTKIND

Lee Gutkind is the author and editor of more than 20 books, most recently *Almost Human: Making Robots Think*. He is founder and editor of the literary quarterly *Creative Nonfiction* and most likely the first to use the term. His second memoir, *Truckin' With Sam: A Father and Son*, *The Mick and The Dyl, Rocking and Rolling, On the Road* is forthcoming. He spoke with nonfiction editor Sandra Allen via telephone from Pittsburgh, where he is a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Communication.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: I know some writers of what you'd call 'creative nonfiction' who really despise the term, perhaps because they resent the need to emphasize the creativity of the art form ('all art forms should be creative,' 'that's an oxymoron,' etc.), or prefer others terms, like 'literary nonfiction,' 'new journalism' or just 'essay.' You're heavily associated with the term 'creative nonfiction': you edit a journal by the same name and have defined and defended it time and again. Do you ever get sick of your role in defending or defining this genre?

Lee Gutkind: Oh you know, the answer to that is yes and no. 'Yes' because half the people who ask about the meaning of creative nonfiction think they're really clever, the first to figure out that the term could be an oxymoron. And they laugh and make fun and you kind of look at them like, 'Where have you been for the last fifteen or twenty years?' They go on and on and they think they're very cool. So I get annoyed, when people who should know better ask such an empty question.

On the other hand, I feel that it is part of my responsibility as a writer and an editor, as a member of the literary

community, to try to be as articulate and helpful as I can in order to explain and introduce the genre to all kinds of people who will benefit from it. The people that most benefit from creative nonfiction are not necessarily academicians or folks in the writing community, but those who have interesting and compelling stories to tell, whether they're younger or older. There are lots of folks who have plenty of things to say about what has happened to them in the world—new and engaging stuff. The existence and popularity of creative nonfiction, and journals like mine, make it possible for new writers to do so. Providing that outlet is a responsibility I take very seriously.

SA: How have you seen your efforts to carve out and define the genre succeed or fail over the last forty years? Especially in recent years, what have you seen change?

LG: Well, we've already talked about one change—more people understand the term and the genre, know how to write it and read it. Also, it is now a fully accepted concept in academic programs. It was quite a battle to get my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh to approve an MFA in creative nonfiction—but they did—after fighting for a couple of years. The program was the first. Now, you cannot keep up with how many universities in the world—in the world—where you can get an MFA in creative nonfiction. There has to be at least fifty—and maybe a lot more. Finally, creative nonfiction is not just a term the academy covets; it is literally the most popular genre for readers. Not only is the memoir hot, the whole immersion journalism or dramatic narrative nonfiction concept is a really significant part of the publishing world, in magazines and in books. Science, business, sports—you name it. Nonfiction narrative is what is happening and what sells. That's what's happened over the last fifteen or twenty years, and it's quite amazing, I think.

SA: *It seems to me that what motivated you to begin to use the term ‘creative nonfiction’ in the first place was to get bodies like the National Endowment of the Arts and the wider public to embrace the potential for literature about subjects that happened to be true. You’ve campaigned for decades just to open people up to the possibility that yes, nonfiction can be art. There are some, though, who I think would say ‘The future is hybrid,’ meaning that at some point, we won’t need to delineate between fiction and nonfiction. Do you agree with a prediction like this? Do you see this as a favorable end-result?*

LG: *I’ve certainly heard that a number of times, but I don’t think it is going to happen. Writers are too egocentric; they won’t in the end want to abandon their individuality and personal specific focus. If you combine fiction and nonfiction then you will also “hybridize” poetry and prose. The poets couldn’t live with their loss of identity.*

SA: *I have to ask my obligatory question about memoir and scandal: Anthologized in the first Best Creative Nonfiction collection, which you edited, is Daniel Nester’s essay “Notes on Frey,” which attempts to identify how the genre did, or should, act in reaction to the Million Little Pieces incident. In it, Nester mentions our cultures’ “addiction to veracity.” I was curious about that term because the word ‘addiction’ has a negative connotation, obviously. I’d assume that you’d agree that all the rabble-rousing that we get after one of these false memoirs is outed is distracting to the genre. But do you agree with Nester’s estimation that we’re addicted to veracity?*

LG: *No I don’t. I don’t believe that. I think we just care whether what we’re dealing with is true or not. You’re interviewing me,*

“I gotta tell you, I fear everything about the publishing industry.”

more truthful. But also as people become more sophisticated I hope they can begin to see that there's a big difference between being factual, sticking to the facts and being able to check what you believe and on the other hand providing the leeway necessary to the author who writes about what he or she things and feels even if in the end it might not be exactly true.

SA: You've focused some of your recent attention to the matter of blogs. What has led you to embrace and publish and anthologize and defend the blog? Is it some sort of popular pressure? Or is it the idea that there are probably some good ones because there are so many of them?

*LG: Not only are there good ones, I believe in the *Best Creative Nonfiction* both *One* and *Two*, especially our second one, that we've published some pretty good blog entries. I don't know if you saw *Best Three*, which just came out, but we have even more blogs that are even better and in fact one was so effective. I'm not sure if you saw this, but the *New Yorker* in its own blog blogged about how effective a piece we published was. So in fact I'm pretty proud of not listening to all of these*

you want *me*, you don't want me to make up anything, you want me to tell you what I really feel. I think that that whole *Million Little Pieces* incident is gone. There are still scandals that develop but they don't last very long. I think we're all settling down and we're all trying—publishers, editors, writers—are trying to be

people who are constantly criticizing and making fun of blogs and putting them down by moving forward and discovering some really good writers. Not long ago there were many critics of creative nonfiction, including James Wolcott who initially roasted me in *Vanity Fair* for being a navel gazer and dubbed me “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction.” And now Wolcott is blogging. He’s perfected navel-gazing to an art.

SA: Do you ever fear that the blog, this hyper-democratization of self-publishing, could be the end of publishing industry as we know it?

LG: I gotta tell you, I fear everything about the publishing industry. I fear those supposedly slick people who are controlling HarperCollins and RandomHouse and who are giving millions upon millions of dollars to writers who are not nearly as good as some of the bloggers. They are bankrupting the publishing community and slowly diminishing the quality of the work that is getting the most attention. This is not good for writers—or, more to the point, readers.

SA: Have you observed anything about blogs in particular that changes the way people write in a way that you think is interesting to development of the craft?

LG: No I don’t, and this is a problem. One of the reasons that so many blogs are so bad is that most of the people blogging have no respect for or understanding of the craft. One would wish that there could be a czar of blogging. One would wish that the czar could draw a line and say, ‘you may not blog unless you take lessons from an accomplished editor or writer,’ so at least you understand a little bit about what the craft is all about. You are giving a bad name to blogs.’

SA: So you see the blog as a place where content should be favored above perhaps style or form? And that's okay in your opinion?

LG: I think that content is always more important than style. Style can be learned, where content can't so easily be learned. And so I appreciate the content of the blog when it is there and the spirit with which the bloggers do it. I think that lots of times within the publishing world and within the literary world we choose style over substance and I think that that's a mistake and a problem.

SA: During your Jon Stewart appearance he often asked you questions as if you had the ability to predict things in the future, because your most recent book was all about robots. I'll do the same.

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What is going to happen to print publishing in light of the internet's rise, in your opinion? Specifically, as founder and editor of a prominent literary quarterly, how do you look at this situation and sleep at night?

LG: If any of us really knew what was going to happen, then we would know where to put our efforts and our money. It seems that what is happening is that to a certain extent literary journals are, not to say dying, but the weak journals are kind of losing support and readers and funding and the stronger journals are remaining—surviving. That's how it should be. In place of the dying ineffective lit journals are online publications which are very good and very strong because

they get and more easily and quickly introduce new voices and new ideas.

I'm thinking that the best of the online publications and the best of the paper publications will last, and that many of the online publications and paper publications will be able to do both. There's nothing more that I'd like to do with *Creative Nonfiction* than publish simultaneously an entire issue online. Before we know it, that's going to happen, and it will expand all of our readerships.

SA: Who would you say are some of the most underappreciated creative nonfiction writers of the moment?

LG: Sometimes I think of the underappreciated writers of my genre are the writers who have been writing creative nonfiction in the past. Like, why do we read George Orwell? I read George Orwell because he was a brilliant immersion creative nonfiction writer. Some of Hemingway's best work was creative nonfiction. I try to get some people who are interested in new creative nonfiction to go back in time. On a more contemporary idea, I think right away of Lauren Slater. Lots of people resent her and don't like her and she's gotten a great deal of criticism for being as quirky and she's so brilliant, she's one of the most brilliant writers as far as the world as ever seen. Philip Roth is the master of masters—but unappreciated by the non-Jewish community. Gay Talese should receive a Pulitzer just for being Gay Talese—and changing the literary landscape.

SA: Are you ever wary of the implications of being called 'the Godfather of creative nonfiction'? Do people mistake you for other godfathers, perhaps bug your house or break your legs because they haven't gotten payment, ever?

LG: People get confused about everything. I cannot tell you how many people have referred to me as ‘the Godfather of creative fiction’ or ‘the grandfather of creative nonfiction.’

SA: *A wag, wag being the odd word in our publication’s title, is a droll wit, a lively joker. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or someone you know in real life. Or in your false reality.*

LG: You’re a wag. You are currently my favorite wag.

SA: *No you have to chose someone else.*

LG: I could think about Colbert, Stephen. And I do have this connection with Jon Stewart; he’s quite a wag, don’t you think? I don’t why I keep wanting to say Hilary Clinton because it isn’t right, but when you asked me the question her head popped into my mind. I know it isn’t accurate but I keep wanting to say Hillary Clinton.