

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION THREE—TRANSCRIPT

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Non-fiction is probably the most widely and misunderstood, confused, and therefore wonderful form of the three that we tend to think of when we think of writing from our own imaginations and our own experiences: fiction, poetry, and then this thing called, well, what is it called? Literary non-fiction, creative non-fiction? It's the form that consists of things like memoirs and essays and all kinds of pieces that almost don't have a name. They can be short or they can be book length. I think that's where we have to start when we think about this form is that we don't really have it defined as clearly as we do lyric poetry or the novel. Sure, every novel is different from every other novel, but the truth is we have an idea when we say "novel" what we're talking about. Not so with non-fiction. The very term non-fiction suggests we don't know what to say, it's a non-this or a non-that. Someone once suggested that personally voiced writing in our times, writing out of your life, your experience, not in fiction and not in poetry, but in what we like to think of as what really happened, what you're really thinking, that that form is not so much non-fiction as non-poetry. The idea here being that you're writing out of your consciousness, not just out of your experience. So that's why it doesn't really matter if you've had an interesting life or not because whether or not your life has been interesting, exists within the sentences and the paragraphs that you write, so describing a teacup or your mother frying eggs in the morning—that might actually be more interesting than some harrowing car chase that you might think is really exciting and really interesting. We also have to think a little bit about the current history of non-fiction. We talk about the novel we're talking about something that has two hundred plus year old history, we can trace it. Of course lyric poetry exists at least since Sappho and the Psalms and before that. Memoir and essay, those two are also very ancient when we think about the beginning of memoir, we can go back to 397 when Augustine, a bishop in North Africa sat down and wrote his confessions, which was his life story. He wasn't writing about how he was converted to Christianity, that had happened considerably earlier, he was actually talking about why he was still confused and why he didn't know who God was or why he was, who he was. He sat down with a very modern problem which was to figure out how he fit into the world. He wasn't so much a psychologized person as he was a person trying to fit into his culture. And maybe that's the best way to think about personally-voiced non-fiction, whether it's a book-length memoir or a shorter personal essay that has narrative aspects where you're thinking about something that happened and you're trying to understand it. So, in a way, the form doesn't try to re-tell a narrative so much as it uses a narrative, "this happened, this happened," and then, what does it mean to me now that that happened? What does it mean to me that I'm still thinking of my mother and my grandmother fixing breakfast in the morning in very very poor part of town, a neighborhood doesn't even exist anymore? Why am I resurrecting that? Not simply can I resurrect it, but what does it mean to me?" So there's an aspect of telling the story in a way, you're telling about your grandmother making breakfast out of very little food, actually I'm thinking here of my own grandmother who used to make something called "nothing soup" because there was very little at the end of the month after the paycheck had almost come to an end. She would then put some bacon grease in the pan and some onions, because you always had those, and some water and salt and pepper and that would be nothing soup. So, why does that stay in my mind? What does it mean? What am I thinking about her, that world that doesn't exist anymore but it is somehow existing within me? Within me and in my memory.

So that, in a way, is part of what's happening when we write out of our own lives. We are not writing because we think we have something important, in fact often times it's something that isn't important we think to anyone else. It's something discarded, but we picked it up, it's ours and the secret in a sense, and I don't know if it's a secret, but the kind of key to writing successful memoirs is to take

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seriously those shards of memory, it's almost as if you pick up a little piece, a broken piece of pottery, it's got a flower on it, it's very pretty in itself, its beautiful in a way, but it doesn't make anything. And you pick it up, you look at it, you begin writing from that and a whole world begins to establish itself through your consideration of that little image, that memory, that moment. One of the exciting things about personally-voiced writing as I think of it, this kind of non-fiction that isn't journalism, but is some kind of memory work, or it can be memory work from yesterday for that matter. Is that because the conventions, literary conventions aren't set in the way they are for some of the other genres, we have a lot of questions that we can bring to bear. And as a writer, you can yourself begin to decide where you want to establish yourself in relationship to some of these questions. And interestingly, the questions are, I would say, ethical as much as they are literary. For example, I think there are two big goalposts that we play between when we're writing memoir or personal essay. One is "am I telling the truth?" Or even more, "Is it possible to tell the truth given that everything I'm talking about happened a long time ago? Or happened in a way where I only have a piece of it? How do I negotiate that so the reader doesn't feel that I'm making stuff up. Or, wait a minute, do I get to make stuff up?" These are really ethical questions, not simply literary ones, and that's why they're, it's as if something really important's at stake. It's not just something that you're kind of doing for entertainment, it's something you have to really decide where you stand in relationship to this question. The other question is likewise very, has moral implications and that is, "who am I to write about, not just this, whatever the 'this' is, but about these people? Do I really get to talk about my mother and father in a particular way? They don't get to come back at me. Maybe they're dead, or maybe they just aren't able to do what you can do which is sit down and write." Well, these questions are not just troubles and problems. They're actually the working clay of the form that we're talking about because where you position yourself in relationship to these questions is part of how you will write and what you will write. And everybody has a different point of view, my own point of view is that you don't make stuff up. No. If you want to do that, write yourself a novel, that's a great thing to do. But if you're trying to write out of your memory and out of your life's experience, then your job is to retrieve as much and as accurately as you can, acknowledging not so much what you don't know, but acknowledging to the reader your effort to understand what it is that's coming. Here's an example: as a wonderful book, I think is a wonderful book anyways, called "Running in the Family" by Micahel Ondaatje, whose also a poet and is probably best known as a fiction writer. But the memoir he wrote is a short memoir is called "Running in the Family" and in it he describes the death of his grandmother, his beloved grandmother Lalla, who was a real character, she's kind of a wild woman, especially after her husband died and she was a widow and was sort of on the loose and went to lots of card parties. This all took place in what is now Sri Lanka although it was Ceylon at the time. And at the very beginning of the book, Ondaatje says his grandmother died in a flood, so we know before we even get into the book that that's how she dies, that's a fact. But we read the whole book about this wild and crazy family and we finally get to a chapter, and by the way the chapters are extremely short, as if acknowledging that thing I said earlier about the shard, it's just a piece here, a piece there, put together but not connected in a flow, but more in a kind of spots of light coming from this life. So, he finally gets to the moment when he's going to describe her death and it's actually the longest chapter. And by that I mean it's like three pages, so it's not long. And he begins to talk about how she was playing cards and drinking this local beverage, whatever it was. And she opens the door and is swept away into the flood and he describes how she's waving to everybody as she goes and how she's smiling and laughing and enjoying the ride. And until she finally hits the blue flowers of a jacaranda tree and of course she dies, she's dead. Well, you know immediately that he made that up. So, did he break the rules of non-fiction? No. Not in my book. Even though I'm a strict constructionist about being truthful. Because he's letting you know what he was thinking, imagining, wondering. He was trying to give his grandmother a wonderful death and a death commensurate with her wild and dramatic personality. So, in a way, that's a moment when you see him thinking his way through that fact. And it's that thinking, as long as the reader knows

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you're not lying. As for the other question, mother and father, brother and sister, ex-lover, ex-friend, current friend who you worry might be an ex-friend, all of that is something that you have to feel you have a right to talk about, to write about. And in a way, that worry should be kind of like a guardian angel on your shoulder telling you, leading you forward as you tell the truth that belongs to you. This is a new form in a sense, even though Augustine started us in on the memoir all those years ago in 397. It's still a new form because it's been taken out, not as a retrospective, not as "I'm looking back to see what happened and I'm either bragging or complaining about back there," instead It's something in the middle of life where I think "there's' this stuff hanging on me, but I want to go forward." And what does that mean, how do I do that? How do I do that? I do that by stopping right here and thinking about that past in the light of my current self and moving forward in an attempt. I was about to say "in an understanding," but you may never get to an understanding. An attempt to understand how that past has helped to form or deform for that matter. It's a wonderful and exciting thing to do and whether you think you want to be a writer or whether you just want to be human being in full possession of your history and your moment in time, it's probably the single most essential piece of writing that you can attempt. And that word "attempt" is at the heart of the form. Essay means, in French, "to try" or "to attempt", so go for it.