

By Any Other Name Creative non-fiction is the new literary buzzword

Okay, I'll admit it—I used to be a fiction junkie. When it was time to hunker down on the couch with cozy blankets and a pot of tea, I always had a novel in hand. When I thought of non-fiction, I thought scientific essays or high school social studies textbooks. In other words, boring! Then one day, a few months ago, I stumbled into a creative non-fiction workshop. Two days later I stumbled out with more questions than answers, but I knew one thing: I was hooked. And now wherever I look, from readings to literary contests to university programs to magazines, it seems to be following me.

What is creative non-fiction? Tricky question, but there are some basics most writers seem to agree with. (How's that for non-committal?) It's a type of writing solidly based in reality, but which uses literary devices usually associated with fiction to tell the tale: description, plot, character development, dialogue, metaphor, personal reflection, and presence of the narrator. In a nutshell, it's non-fiction that reads like fiction. To hear University of Victoria creative non-fiction instructor David Leach explain it, "It uses the skills of a novelist, poet and dramatist to show the truth behind the facts."

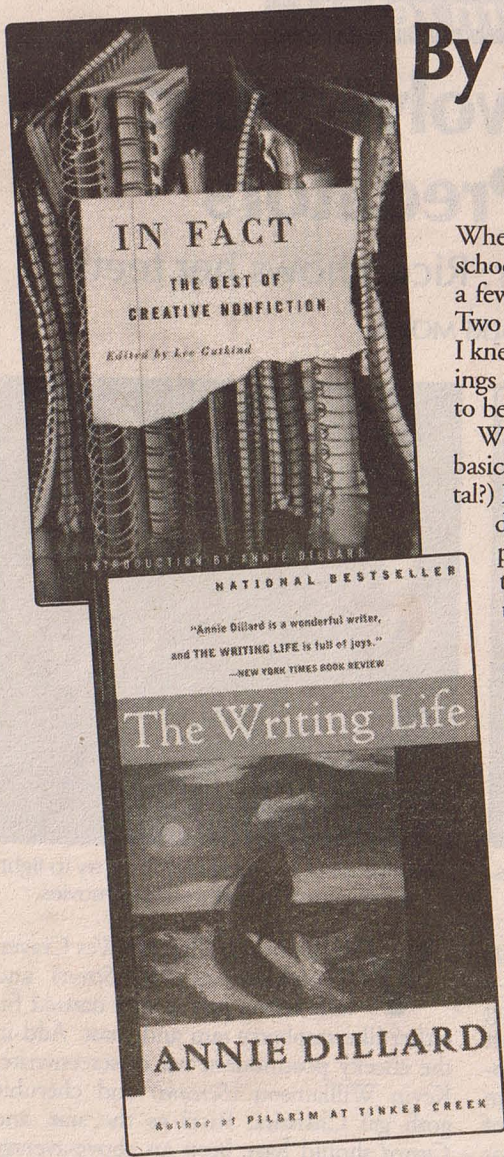
While the term "creative non-fiction" has become a bit of a buzzword of late (think Annie Dillard, Richard Rodriguez, Lee Gutkind), the genre is nothing new. Just look at Phillip Lopate's anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*. It includes works of creative non-fiction from Roman philosopher Seneca and Sei

Shonagon (a lady of the 10th century Japanese court) to Virginia Woolf and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In the 1960s, the term "New Journalism" took hold with the works of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson and it has also been referred to as literary journalism, narrative non-fiction, and, most recently, creative non-fiction has taken root. It's a broad term that covers fields as diverse as biographies, memoirs, personal essays and travel writing, to name a few.

As life rarely unfolds like a good piece of fiction, what liberties can writers take with their subject matter and still get away with calling it non-fiction? While there are no hard and fast rules, writers need to be fair, honest, conscientious and stay true to the facts. It may be tempting to fill in some gaps with a bit of invented dialogue or massage the facts a bit to suit a literary purpose but, as Leach explains, this crosses the rules of good journalism and will leave the reader not knowing what is true and what isn't. "Stick to the truth," he cautions. "It has to have happened."

There are those who feel "creative non-fiction" is just a silly label that is being used to create a literary genre where one doesn't exist. They argue there is no "creative" non-fiction, just good and bad. (You wouldn't call a good novel "creative" fiction, of course. It's just fiction, end of story.) But if calling a story, article or book "creative non-fiction" encourages people to pick it up, then why not go with it? After all, it worked on me.

—Sarah Gignac



Words To Live By

Promoting creative non-fiction is exactly what the organizers of "**Sounding Off . . . Again**" are out to do. Writers Jill Margo, Kitty Hoffman, Margaret Thompson and Lynne Van Luven have put together their second such reading to raise creative non-fiction's profile in the local community. This Thursday night's reading will include a few established writers (including former *Monday* arts editor David Leach), but will mostly focus on emerging writers like Joan Skogan, Kerry Luckey, Shanna Baker, Jeff Andrew, Meg Jabusch, Courtney Tait, Charlene Heilman, and Sherrie Silman. The by-donation reading starts at 7:30 p.m. at the Second Story Cafe, 579 Johnson. For more details, call 385-BOOK.

—S.G.