

American Creative Nonfiction: Background and History

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Since the colonial era, written records of authentic experiences have been instrumental in the development of the nation's literary identity. Although it is often difficult to discern the extent to which an author's attention to the potential literary artistry of truth-telling has influenced his or her writing, some of the most uniquely American texts fall into the category of creative nonfiction. Mark Twain's remembrances of his Mississippi River travels, John Muir's celebration of California's mountain ranges, Truman Capote's reconstruction of small-town Kansas murders—such accounts, and countless more, span generations and have been essential in defining and preserving the cultural character of the country. They inspire readers to delve into the distant and more recent past to become immersed in the events, landscapes, conflicts, and customs of the United States and its diverse communities.

As early as the seventeenth century, colonists demonstrated their appreciation for creative nonfiction by popularizing captivity narratives, accounts of seizure and escape that often dramatized the savagery of Native American captors and highlighted the Puritan principles of their hostages. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, published in 1682, exemplifies such characteristics. Rowlandson identifies “the dolefullest day” of her life as February 10, 1675, during which Wampanoag Indians attacked Lancaster, a settlement in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (310). They set homes on fire, murdered several residents, and took Rowlandson and her three children, among others, captive. Rowlandson, the wife of a Lancaster minister, spent eleven weeks traveling around with the Wampanoag, and her youngest daughter Sarah died about a week into captivity. Despite such horrors, Rowlandson drew strength from her spirituality, and her inspirational account of her family's ordeal was widely circulated.

Other captivity narratives of the era also were well publicized, such as *The Captivity of Hannah Dustin* (1696–97) by Cotton Mather and *The Redeemed Captive, Returning to Zion* by John Williams (1707), and similarly promoted piety in the face of calamity. This rhetoric helps situate the works within the category of creative nonfiction because authorial ideology, creatively expressed within the context of historically accurate storytelling, exerts its influence upon the accounts and shapes their development. Unlike other forms of nonfiction, creative nonfiction, according to Lee Gutkind, does not require “balance and objectivity” (11). The genre allows for a quantity of dramatic license that facilitates impassioned accounts of events, helping distinguish such accounts from nonfiction. The questions of authorship and authenticity surrounding some captivity narratives further encourage this literary categorization. According to Kathryn Derounian-Stodala and James Levernier, “More often than not the individual captivity narrative constitutes an amalgamation of voices and input, each with its own agenda and design” (11). It seems clear that, while some authors who lived to tell of Native American captivity relayed the drama of the experience through direct reportage, others may have employed literary devices to capitalize on the reading public’s voracity for these tales. Like slave narratives, another important form of captivity narrative, each text must to be evaluated according to its own merits—its origins, reliance upon literary devices, and message—before it is categorized.

Colonial-era writers also enriched the country’s literature through autobiography, which, along with memoir, remains a popular form of creative nonfiction today, although writers from every era in American history have produced culturally significant autobiographical works. Influential men of letters like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin wrote prolifically and well outside of the realm of political texts to include works that are considered essential to the early American canon. Franklin’s well-known autobiography has been characterized by Jay Parini as the “first major autobiography by an American” and the book with which “American literature begins” (11, 13). Parini notes that the term “autobiography” was not yet in circulation when Franklin was

writing, but that the chronicle of his life from 1771 to 1788 “broke the generic boundaries suggested by ‘memoir’ and ‘confession,’ combining both and moving beyond both” in what emerged as an “exemplary life” of the author (12). Certainly, as Ben Yagoda explains, the expectations for memoir and autobiography have evolved significantly over time, with the most recent incarnation of memoir allowing for “a certain leeway” with content that is no longer expected of the autobiography (2–3). Today, memoir is generally considered a subcategory of autobiography that offers a glimpse into a particular period of the author/subject’s life, while an autobiography offers a more encompassing picture. For example, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)—a memoir that draws on literary devices such as metaphor and addresses her early experiences with racism, insecurity, abuse, and teenage pregnancy—is also the first of six volumes in her autobiography.

Of course, many forms of creative nonfiction are autobiographical in nature and are associated with various subgenres, such as travel writing, which has a rich and varied history in this country. Since the late-seventeenth century, such works have encouraged readers to consider the ever-evolving sense of American identity as it is reflected in the writings of travelers on both American soil and abroad. Rowlandson’s captivity narrative is often also associated with travel writing because it describes her journey into the New England wilderness. Philip Gould notes that other forms of early travel writing, such as William Penn’s “Some Account of the Providence of Pennsylvania in America” (1681), were produced to help attract British emigrants and, therefore, offer an idealized version of the New World (13). In the eighteenth century, British American travel writing continued to develop “in the context of other genres like nature writing, promotional writing about settling the American frontier, spiritual autobiography, and military history” (Gould 13). Despite the topical variety in travel writing from this era, all forms were, to some extent, “promotional writings” that cast British America as a land of abundance for readers (Gould 25). In 1819, Washington Irving exerted his profound influence on the genre with the first serial installations of *The Sketch Book*

of *Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, a work that interposes pseudonymous autobiographical sketches with some of his most renowned stories, including “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and which delighted both American and British readers. Early in *The Sketch Book*, Irving emphasizes the allure of travel for him and admits to having a “rambling propensity” (7), and this theme helps link the book’s varied chapters, a handful of which are set in America, but most of which describe English scenes. Irving notes that “it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand, and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches” (9).

Certainly, records of expeditions abroad also dominate early American letters. Thomas Jefferson recorded his experiences in France, Holland, and Germany from 1784 to 1789. In 1804, John Quincy Adams published an account of his tour of the Silesia region of Central Europe. Many influential novelists of the nineteenth century also kept records of their expeditions, whether for the creative fulfillment that comes from ordering new experiences, or for potential publication—or both. James Fenimore Cooper wrote books about his European travels during the 1830s, and although they are generally considered novels, Herman Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) were inspired by his experiences as a seaman. Two decades later, Mark Twain would draw upon this tradition in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) and *A Tramp Abroad* (1880); although both chronicle his experiences in Europe, the latter text includes many fictional elements.

Of course, Twain is better known for his American travelogues, particularly *Roughing It* (1872)—in which he describes, with characteristic humor, his stagecoach journey out West and excursion to the Sandwich Islands—and *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), a memoir about his days as a steamboat pilot. Other prominent figures in the regional literary movement also wrote travel sketches around the end of the century, in addition to widely-read fiction. Sarah Orne Jewett composed first-person accounts of her frequent outings around coastal Maine for publication in periodicals of the era and for inclusion, alongside her stories, in various collections. Sioux author

and activist Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, published eye-opening autobiographical articles about being recruited by Quaker missionaries to leave the Yankton Reservation to attend a school in Indiana designed to teach Native American children manual skills and assimilate them into the dominant culture. Yet other fiction writers were inspired by their respective regional affiliations to produce other types of nonfiction. Hamlin Garland, whose short stories and novels feature the hard-working people of the upper Midwest, found success with his 1917 autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border*, and its 1921 sequel, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, which won a Pulitzer Prize.

Travel writing continued to adopt diverse forms in the twentieth century. In the first decade, William Dean Howells and Henry James, both known for their contributions to the realist movement in American fiction, published nonfiction accounts of their travels in Europe. Although it was not printed until three years after his death, Nobel Prize-winning modernist Ernest Hemingway enriched the travel-writing canon with *A Moveable Feast* (1964), a memoir about the expatriate experience in 1920s Paris that featured many socialites with whom he hobnobbed (including Gertrude Stein—also an innovator of creative nonfiction with her 1933 book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in which she describes her own life through the narrative voice of her longtime partner). Like Melville's work, the travel narratives of Beat writer Jack Kerouac are classified as fiction, yet his seminal work *On the Road* (1957) offers only thinly veiled accounts of his road-trip escapades with fellow Beats Neal Cassady, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. A few years later, John Steinbeck would produce a more innocuous road narrative in *Travels with Charley* (1962), which chronicles the aging author's cross-country journey with his poodle—a work that perhaps foreshadowed the recent popularity of dog-themed nonfiction. Adventure literature—the creative aftermath of shipwrecks, hiking expeditions gone awry, dangerous military operations, and the like—has also long enjoyed popularity in this country and remains a prevalent subcategory of both biography and travel writing. Some works, like Alfred Lansing's *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible*

Voyage (1959), recount others' travails, while others, like Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (1997), offer first-person accounts of survival.

While the term "travel" may, for contemporary readers, conjure a pleasant association with the term "vacation," it is important to note that not all travel writing chronicles leisurely—or even voluntary—mobility. As Virginia Whatley Smith has demonstrated, captivity and forced relocation are inherent to the records of many former slaves, and "[t]he slave narrative thus generated its own sub-genre of travel writing" (197). Smith identifies *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, a Slave, Written by Himself* (1789) as "the seminal model for the slave narrative" (198) in its first-person testimony of the brutalities of slavery and the story of his subsequent freedom. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, narratives by former slaves including Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs became popular, forcing readers to confront the dehumanizing effects of legally sanctioned racial oppression and helping fuel the abolitionist movement. After the Civil War, Booker T. Washington and other former slaves continued to record their experiences, further developing the genre. The prominence of slave narratives in academic curricula today and the 2013 adaptation of Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) into a critically acclaimed film speak to the resonance of the form. However, the extent to which any particular slave narrative fits into the category of creative nonfiction varies greatly, with some, more than others, exhibiting the attention to literary technique that typifies the genre. Other works, like Hannah Bond's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, which was likely written in the 1850s, but published for the first time in 2002 under the pen name Hannah Crafts, are considered novels, but have been deemed largely autobiographical by scholars. Like with Native American captivity narratives, questions of authorship shroud some accounts, as it was common for white sympathizers to record the stories of freed or escaped slaves and to potentially take some literary license. Regardless of an individual account's accuracy, slave narratives are significant as the first major movement in a rich legacy of African American literature. Moreover, the texts

were essential to the development during the mid-twentieth century of other influential autobiographical writings that advocated for increased civil rights, such as those by Malcolm X and Richard Wright.

National conflicts over race, equality, individuality, and capitalism were also catalysts for intellectual radicalism and literary experimentalism in the decades leading up to the Civil War. In the early 1840s, a group of reformists that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott, among others, introduced their transcendentalist philosophy, which celebrated independence and individualism and challenged racial and gender inequality, and wrote about their experiments in transcendental living. *Walden* (1854), in which Thoreau investigates an existence characterized by solitude and asceticism as an alternative to the “lives of quiet desperation” (8) plaguing most Americans, remains one of the most influential books to emerge from this intellectual movement—and from this country. Despite his keen attention to accurately recording the natural features of his setting, Thoreau fictionalizes key aspects of his experiences at Walden Pond, including the length of his stay, and he provides his readers with a conclusion (Parini 13). Such moves align it with other works of creative nonfiction, and it remains an inspirational force in many other genres, including nature writing.

Other writers of the mid-1800s, including Susan Fenimore Cooper, were also drawing upon nonfiction forms, such as the diary and natural history, to create texts that helped establish a foundation for modern nature writing, but *Walden* has achieved the most celebrated status. Indeed, influential ecocritic Lawrence Buell has dubbed Thoreau the “patron saint of environmental writing” (115). Along with Emerson, Thoreau helped inspire writers of the late nineteenth century, such as John Muir and John Burroughs, to encourage protection for natural spaces through their nonfiction, which frequently included a combination of scientific facts, accurate observations of the natural world, and personal or philosophical reflections. In 1903, Mary Austin made a significant contribution to creative nonfiction when she combined elements of regional fiction

and environmental nonfiction in *The Land of Little Rain* to promote an ethic of stewardship toward the American Southwest, its land and its life forms. The last half of the twentieth century saw the continued growth of American nature writing, led by authors such as Edward Abbey, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Annie Dillard, all of whom have been instrumental to the genre's development. Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), an indictment of the chemical industry and its effects upon living things, which she famously introduces with her "Fable for Tomorrow" featuring a once-vibrant community beset with a "strange blight" (1), is often associated with the beginning of the modern environmental movement.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of additional creative nonfiction forms, including the literary journalism pioneered by Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and others who challenged the status quo by infusing their reporting with literary techniques that are traditionally associated with fiction. According to Marc Weingarten, "Wolfe and many of his contemporaries recognized [...] one salient fact of life in the sixties: the traditional tools of reporting would be inadequate to chronicle the tremendous cultural and social changes of the era" (6). Also called "the New Journalism" because of a 1973 anthology of representative writings co-edited by Wolfe with that title, the genre's roots can nevertheless be traced to the literary naturalism movement of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, during which journalists such as Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair wrote realistic novels that critiqued various aspects of modern society. Truman Capote's groundbreaking *In Cold Blood* (1965)—a meticulously researched examination of the 1959 Clutter family murders in Holcomb, Kansas, that is written in a novelistic style and that was first serialized in *The New Yorker*—was also highly influential on the genre's development.

In Cold Blood, which Capote classified as a "nonfiction novel" (Weingarten 33), is also considered a seminal work of true crime, a genre in which writers research criminal acts, usually murders, and which often necessitates a degree of speculation in the author's establishment of a cohesive, engaging narrative. It remains a

popular form of nonfiction today although, according to Harold Schechter, “America was from the beginning fertile ground for true narratives of crime” like the Puritan execution sermon (xii). Suggesting that real life is, in fact, often more fascinating than fiction, many prominent fiction writers have experimented with true crime; Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Zora Neale Hurston are among them. Some more recent, widely read examples include John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994) and Erik Larson’s *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed Everything* (2003).

Like those authors who attempt to understand criminal acts by writing about them, others turn to creative nonfiction to try to make sense of illnesses and disabilities. Such narratives benefit their writers, who often increase their self-awareness during the therapeutic composition process, as well as their readers, who may take comfort in identifying with others who have faced similar health-related challenges. Illness narratives gained prominence toward the end of the nineteenth century in response to what Arthur Kleinman describes as “the alienation of the chronically ill from their professional care givers and, paradoxically, to the relinquishment by the practitioner of that aspect of the healer’s art that is most ancient” (xiv). The resultant texts often recount the highly personal trials of the authors, as does William Styron’s *Darkness Visible* (1990), a raw account of crippling depression. Nevertheless, other works, like Philip Roth’s *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), a memoir that recalls his father’s experiences with a terminal brain tumor and its effect upon his family, give voice to the suffering of others.

Americans’ health concerns have also contributed to the skyrocketing popularity of food writing. Indeed, since the late twentieth century, public ideologies have been increasingly linked to an understanding of how the production and consumption of food impacts people’s health, the economy, and the environment. Moreover, what a person chooses to consume—locally grown produce or Green Giant vegetables, a vegan diet or a traditional

Mexican one—often provides a carefully constructed, complex reflection of one’s sociocultural background and beliefs. A diverse group of writers’ attention to what we heap on our plates has created a loosely defined category with examples that run the gamut from environmentally minded critiques of industrial food systems, like Michael Pollan’s 2007 bestseller *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, to cheerily narrated kitchen narratives, like those permeating the increasingly influential blogosphere. Despite the recent outpouring of food writing, its roots are deep and far-reaching in this country. According to Molly O’Neill, there are “foreshadowings of the more specialized food writing of our day in a variety of sources and in every phase of American history: journals, letters, novels, poems, travel accounts, autobiographies, histories, ethnographic studies,” but “an explosion of lively, diverse, mouth-watering food prose” occurred during the mid-twentieth century (xx). Today, food writing can be broken down into many categories that frequently overlap with other nonfiction genres, yet it is common for authors across the field to embrace descriptive writing that evokes sensory reactions. When celebrity TV chef Anthony Bourdain describes his first childhood spoonful of vichyssoise—“the crunch of tiny chopped chives [...], the rich, creamy taste of leek and potato, the pleasurable shock, the surprise that it was cold” (9–10)—the reader’s experience is almost visceral. Such writing and readers’ responses to it often reveal as much about Americans’ gastric indulgences as they do about the human condition.

The dawn of this century saw a yet another form of creative nonfiction gain prominence: the dog memoir. After the success of John Grogan’s *Marley and Me* in 2005, which spawned a box-office hit in 2008, publishers lapped up the sometimes-funny, usually moving stories of human-canine relationships, and the American reading public responded by sending many onto bestseller lists and creating a genre that some have dubbed the “dogoir.” Like other forms of creative nonfiction, the dogoir frequently straddles various categories. For example, the popular 2012 book by Teresa Rhyne, *The Dog Lived (and So Will I)*, features characteristics of the illness narrative, humor writing, the dogoir, and the memoir—all wrapped

up in a true-life tale about one beagle and his owner fighting cancer together.

More traditional memoirs have continued to grow in popularity in the early twenty-first century as well, despite the “seemingly endless stream of memoir scandals” following the infamous exposure of James Frey’s 2003 book *A Million Little Pieces: A Memoir* as largely fictional (Yagoda 7). Public figures—from reality TV stars and athletes to politicians and celebrated authors—have found memoir to be an effective platform for disseminating their anecdotes. In 2014 alone, bookstores cleared off shelf space for memoirists as diverse as Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Rob Lowe, while the gut-busting prose of numerous well-known American comedians—Ellen DeGeneres, Tina Fey, Jon Stewart, Mindy Kaling, and Chelsea Handler, to name a handful—was also on prominent display. Of course, in the past decade, many people outside of the public eye have written well-received accounts of their far-from-average trials and triumphs. Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle* (2005), the story of an unconventional upbringing; Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), a chronicle of international travel and self-discovery; and Piper Kerman’s *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women’s Prison* (2010), an immersion in correctional-facility culture, are among the extraordinary true stories that have gripped readers’ imaginations since the dawn of the new century.

Kerman’s book might be classified as yet another form of American captivity narrative—one that has yet to fully develop, but that highlights the importance of a literary tradition that extends back to the colonial era. Acknowledging this entrenched, varied wealth of creative nonfiction in American literary history deepens one’s understanding of how people across time and across the nation have found fulfillment in recording their most significant experiences and those of others. These true stories—beautifully, comically, grippingly told—are one of the country’s natural treasures.

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