

A Historical Note on Terms

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by Norman Sims

The context explored in this issue by Peter Vandenberg’s review essay reveals a great deal about the academic structures that house the terms—*creative nonfiction* adheres to English departments and *literary journalism* tends to appeal to journalism departments and the profession. I can add a historical footnote.

In 1983 I was working on an anthology that didn’t yet have a name. The term *New Journalism* was outdated and no longer used by writers, not even by Tom Wolfe. While interviewing a number of second generation New Journalists about their craft, I had found characteristics for the contemporary form that were more mature than the techniques associated with New Journalism. This thing needed a new name, but what to call it?

Literary journalism, when I thought of it, seemed appropriate and in 1984 my book was published as *The Literary Journalists*. I did not know that others had used the term before, most notably Edwin H. Ford in a 1937 *Bibliography of Literary Journalism in America* (Burgess Publishing Co., Minneapolis).

Later the term *creative nonfiction* and a series of related terms came along as the Pittsburgh masters degree program was begun in an English Department and Ted Cheney (who taught English and communication at Fairfield University) published *Writing Creative Nonfiction* in 1987.

As Lee Gutkind told Vandenberg, politics influenced the choice of terms. I came out of a journalism background. The frightening term for journalists was “literary,” which as Mark Kramer noted made some writers who used it seem self congratulatory, although they didn’t mind when an academic such as myself used *literary journalist* to describe them. The term *creative nonfiction* introduced other scary responses. I mentioned it to a friend the other day, a children’s book author, who quickly said, “Creative nonfiction—meaning stuff that’s made up?”

Generally, English Departments have used *nonfiction* rather than *journalism*, an academic tic that goes way back and has driven journalists away from English for decades. Despite recent denials, distaste for journalism remains. In July, for example, Charles McGrath wrote in *The New York Times* about a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts that revealed a decline in the reading of literature. *Literature* was defined as “any type of fiction, poetry and plays,” which eliminated nonfiction and journalism and conforms to the structure of traditional English departments. “The notion that imaginative writing is somehow superior to factual writing is one that used to flourish in certain English departments, especially those in thrall to the so-called New Criticism, but in these days it seems a dubious distinction,” wrote McGrath, the former editor of the *Times Book Review*. “Good, artful writing, writing with voice and style, turns up in lots of places: in memoirs, in travel books, in books about history and science, and sometimes even in books about politics and policy.” By eliminating not only nonfiction books but also magazines and journalism from its survey, the NEA made what McGrath called a “perplexing methodological error.” [“What Johnny Won’t Read,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2004, Sect. 4, p. 3]

I’m committed to the term *literary journalism*. In journalism departments, we stress the traditions of accuracy, proper techniques for interviewing and participant observation, and the particular traditions of ethics and professional conduct that reporters need. In English departments, the traditions emphasized have more to do with literary and narrative forms

and less to do with demanding standards of accuracy. Like many things, there are complications and contradictions. Some English departments have a strong tradition of dealing with memoir, which is now considered a part of creative nonfiction. And some wonderful literary journalists are teaching in English—I'm thinking here of John McPhee, who teaches creative writing in the English Department at Princeton. Whatever term gets used, the good news is that we now teach literary journalism or creative nonfiction and our students are improving the way readers apprehend the world.