



# Mastering Creative Nonfiction

*Writing Workshop*

John Hope

# Creative Nonfiction Workshop

## Agenda

- o Creative Nonfiction Definition
- o Focus and Theme
- o Characters and Descriptions
- o ***10 minute Break***
- o Story Structure
- o Tell the Truth
- o Digging into Emotions

Note: Presentation is available: [www.johnhopewriting.com](http://www.johnhopewriting.com)

# Creative Nonfiction Workshop

## Objective

- Master tools and techniques for approaching creative nonfiction and writing effectively





# Creative Nonfiction Definition

# Creative Nonfiction Definition

- o Using *literary techniques* to compose a *factually accurate* story

- o Accurate setting
- o Real people
- o Real events



- o Compelling
- o Vivid
- o Dramatic

# Creative Nonfiction Definition

- o Example: The Great Depression

## The Facts

- o World-wide impact
- o Lasted from 1929 to 1939
- o Began after the stock market crash of October 1929
- o Unemployment in the US rose to 25%

## The Impact





# Creative Nonfiction Definition

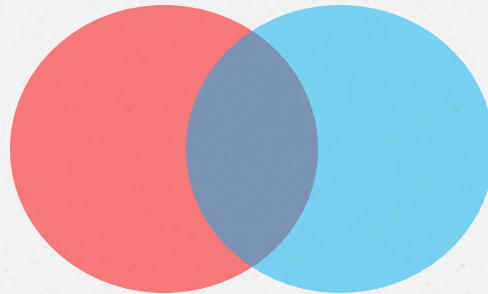
- o How is this different than Memoirs?

## Memoir

- o Personal
- o Your unique life's story

## Creative Nonfiction

- o Broader appeal
- o Telling the story of many people





# Focus and Theme




# Focus and Theme

- o Usually subtle, harder to grasp than other story elements
- o What do you want to tell people about \_\_\_\_\_?
- o How has \_\_\_\_\_ changed your and/or others lives?

# Focus and Theme

- o Theme does not have to be simple
- o Life is not always black and white
  - o Some of the best themes delve into the gray area of life

# Focus and Theme

- o Establishing a solid focus and theme first will tell what details to include and what to omit
  - o Pick a single topic 
  - o Life is filled with details
  - o What to include is as important as what not to include



# Focus and Theme

- Example: Explaining the birds and the bees



# Focus and Theme

## How to Select a Focus and Theme

- o **Step 1: Think about your audience**
  - o What is important to them?
  - o What do you think they should understand?
  - o If a personal experience, what is the take away lesson you've learned that others could relate?



# Focus and Theme

How to Select a Focus and Theme

- o **Step 2: Match your characters' goals**
  - o What do the people in your story want the most?
  - o What are their desires?
  - o What conflict(s) is preventing the characters getting what they want?



# Focus and Theme

## How to Select a Focus and Theme

### o **Step 3: Build a list**

- o Write down a list of possible themes.
- o Select ONE
  - o Warning: The more you select, the more watered down the theme will be.

# Focus and Theme

## How to Select a Focus and Theme

- o **Step 4: Write your manuscript with theme in mind.**
  - o Don't fret too much with the first draft, just keep the theme in mind as a target.
  - o Structure scenes and dialog around the theme.

# Focus and Theme

How to Select a Focus and Theme

- **Step 5: Add theme elements during re-writes.**
  - Think: How can I imply/point to the theme in this scene?



# Focus and Theme

Activity: Selecting a Focus and Theme



- o **Event: 9/11 Tragedy**
- o List Themes
  - o What was important about this?
  - o What can an individual learn from this?
- o Possible Focus
  - o Who should tell this story? (point of view)
  - o How does this affect your character(s)?

# Focus and Theme

Activity: Selecting a Focus and Theme



- o **Event: Having a Baby**
- o List Themes
  - o What was important about this?
  - o What can an individual learn from this?
- o Possible Focus
  - o Who should tell this story? (point of view)
  - o How does this affect your character(s)?



# Focus and Theme

- o Once theme is selected, keep it in mind as you develop each scene
- o Often helps to revisit the theme AFTER manuscript is complete
  - o Layer theme clues
  - o Setting, dialog, mood, details



# Focus and Theme

- o Activity: 3 Little Pigs
  - o What theme/themes are in this story?



# Focus and Theme

- o Activity: 3 Little Pigs
  - o What theme/themes are in this story?
- o Taking your time
- o Working hard
- o Overestimating yourself

Straw house, Stick house, Brick house



Pigs vs Wolf

“Little pig. Little pig. Let me come in.”

“Not by the hair of my chinny chin, chin.”



# Focus and Theme

- o Activity: 3 Little Pigs
  - o What if... the wolf and pigs were friends in the end?
  - o Possible new theme: Unlikely friends come with understanding
  - o Changes in plot can change your theme

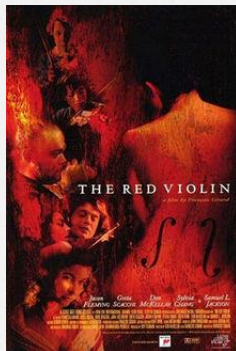




Writing Tip

# Focus and Theme

- o One common method of telling a Creative Nonfiction piece is to center the story on an object
  - o Select something of significance
  - o Follow the history of that object as you weave through lives of your characters



## The Red Violin

Based on a historic 1720 Stradivarius violin nicknamed the “Red Mendelssohn.”

# Focus and Theme

- The Hammer Story



# Characters and Description



# Characters and Description

- o Creative Nonfiction – story of real people
- o As a writer – view people as characters



# Characters and Description

- o Characters are the soul of Creative Nonfiction
  - o The richer the character, the better the story



# Characters and Description

- o #1 Rule of all characters: All characters need to want something that they can't obtain
- o If a character doesn't want something, he/she should not be in your story





# Characters and Description

## *Introducing characters*

- o Mention specific physical characteristics
  - o 40 years old, woman, five foot ten, dirty blonde, rough skin
  - o Sights, smells, touch
  - o How does he/she move, talk
  - o Make use of analogies
- o Background
  - o Pepper background information as the story develops
  - o Avoid info dumps
  - o Include just enough to get to the next sentence

# Characters and Description

- o Uncle Charlie Story





# Characters and Description

o Activity: Describe a pet as your best friend



- o What did he look like?
- o How did he act when he saw you?
- o What did he smell like?
- o What did he eat?
- o Funny moments?



# Characters and Description

## *Character arc*

1. Show how the character is now
2. Show character enduring / trying to resolve conflict
3. Show how the character is different afterwards

Can be done for ALL main characters

# 10 Minute Break





# Story Structure



# Story Structure

- o All stories follow some sort of trajectory
  - o Introduction of characters
  - o Rise and Fall of action / conflict
  - o Resolution



- o Creative nonfiction typically has a lesson / moral / take away by the end

# Story Structure

- o The keys to story structure
  - o Introduce the MAIN conflict as soon as possible
  - o Every scene should progress the plot and reveal character
    - o Fill in backstory as the story progresses
  - o Resolve the MAIN conflict

# Story Structure

o Example (a joke):

Uber passenger tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask him a question.

The driver screamed, lost control of the car, and nearly hit a bus.

The passenger smiled sheepishly. “I didn't realize a little tap would scare you so much.”

The driver caught his breath. “Not your fault. For weeks, I'd been driving a hearse.”



# Story Structure



Where they meet is  
at the center of our  
story

# Story Structure

- Story Boarding – Decide how to tell the story



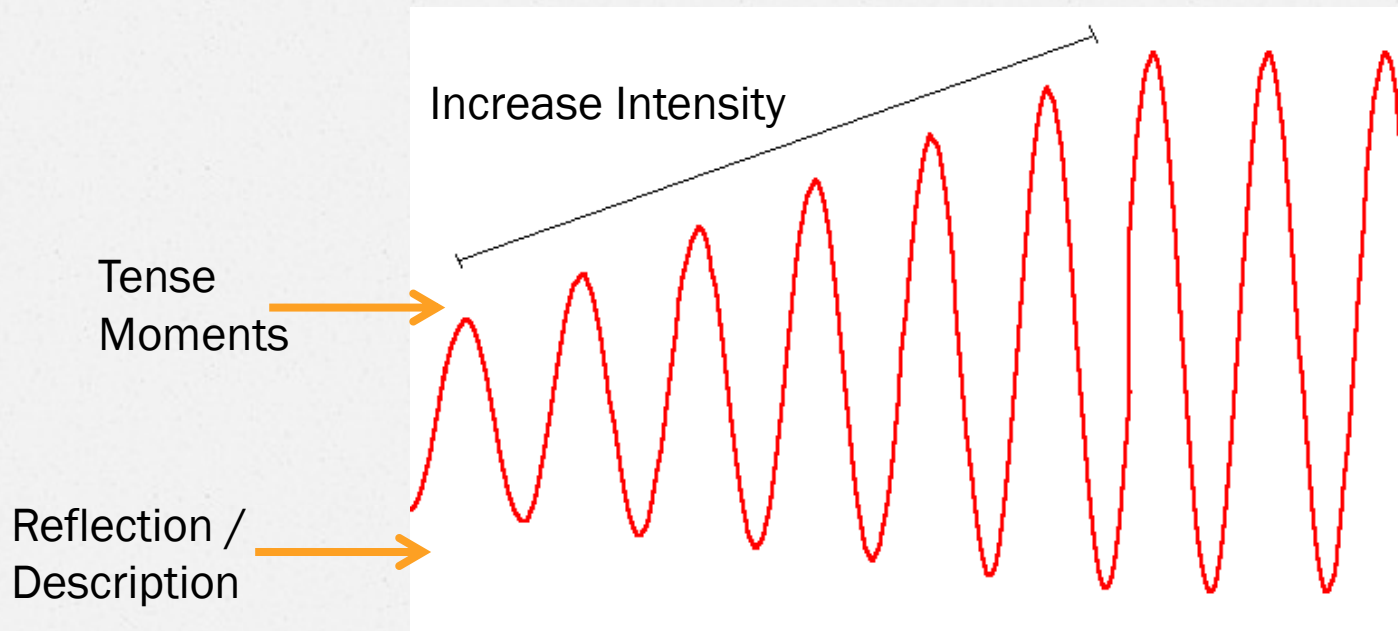
# Story Structure

- o Start with a Hook
  - o First sentences are often the hardest
  - o Jump into the story, make the reader want to continue
- o All this happened, more or less. —Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)
- o It was a pleasure to burn. —Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)
- o Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person. —Anne Tyler, *Back When We Were Grownups* (2001)



# Story Structure

## o Pacing

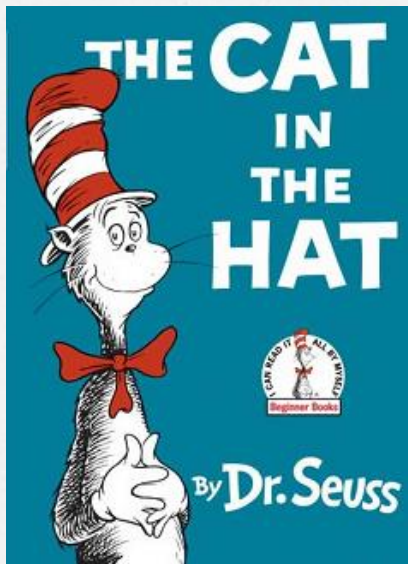


# Story Structure

- o Factors that affect pacing
  - o Amount of elaborate descriptive language verses quick, blunt words
  - o Number of words used
  - o Criticality of the conflict
  - o The amount of time that passes

# Story Structure

## o Example: The Cat in the Hat



- o Kids are bored
- o Cat does some juggling, frightens the fish
- o Brings Thing 1 and 2, both destroy the house
- o Mom approaches
- o Cat leaves with Thing 1 and 2
- o Cat returns with a machine that cleans up at the last moment
- o Mom arrives



# Story Structure

## o Example: Come a Little Bit Closer



Songwriters: Tommy Boyce  
/ Wes Farrell / Bobby Hart

Come a Little Bit Closer  
lyrics © Morris Music, Inc

# Story Structure

Come a Little Bit Closer, part 1

In a little café just the other side of the border  
She was just sitting there givin' me looks  
that made my mouth water

So I started walking her way  
She belonged to bad man Jose  
And I knew, yes I knew I should leave  
When I heard her say, yeah

"Come a little bit closer  
You're my kind of man  
So big and so strong  
Come a little bit closer  
I'm all alone and the night is so long"



# Story Structure

Come a Little Bit Closer, part 2

So we started to dance. In my arms, she felt so inviting.  
And I just couldn't resist, just one little kiss, so exciting.

Then I heard the guitar player say  
"Vamos, Jose's on his way"  
Then I knew, yes I knew I should run  
But then I heard her say, yeah

"Come a little bit closer  
You're my kind of man  
So big and so strong  
Come a little bit closer  
I'm all alone and the night is so long"



# Story Structure

Come a Little Bit Closer, part 3

Then the music stopped, when I looked the cafe was empty  
Then I heard Jose say, "Man, you know  
you're in trouble plenty."

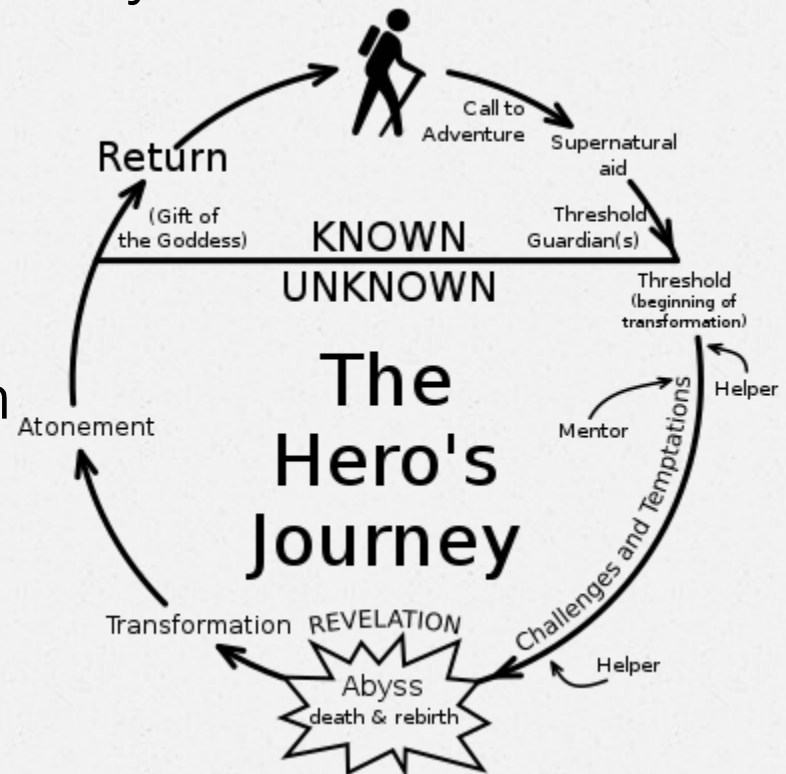
So I dropped my drink from my hand  
And out through the window I ran  
And as I rode away  
I could hear her say to Jose, yeah

"Come a little bit closer  
You're my kind of man  
So big and so strong  
Come a little bit closer  
I'm all alone and the night is so long"

# Story Structure

## o Activity: The Hero's Journey

- o Select a personal journey in your life
- o Step through each piece of the diagram on the right
- o Tell your story





Tell the Truth



# Tell the Truth

- o Gather the facts first
  - o Setting
  - o Characters
  - o Dates
  - o Circumstances
- o Never contradict facts



# Tell the Truth

- o Research can be fun
  - o Be a detective, uncover facts
  - o Relate facts together
- o Remember: People are people no matter what time period you are researching



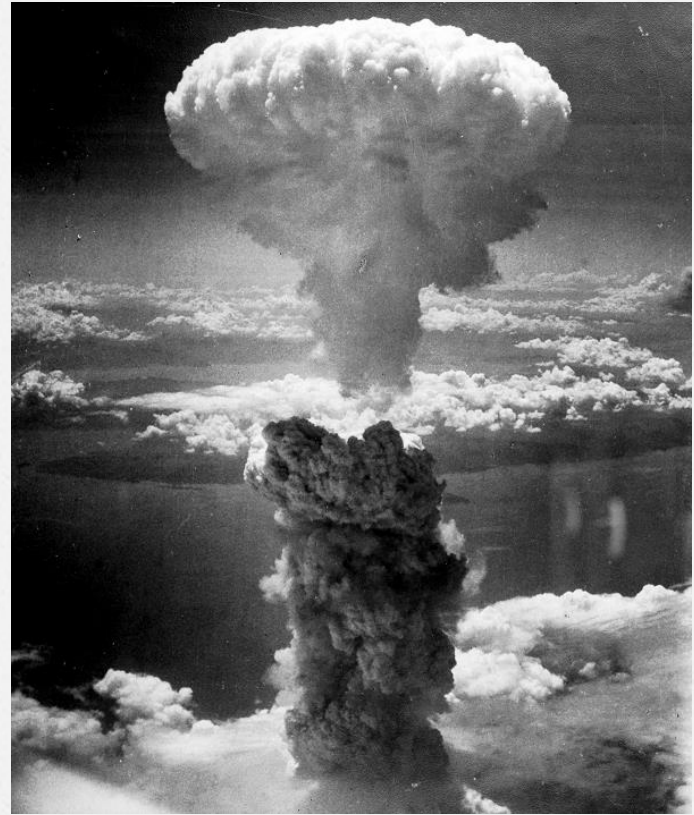
# Tell the Truth

- o Facts will likely have holes
  - o Exactly what was said
  - o Sometimes, order of events are in question
  - o The exact cause of events may be in question
- o Determine plausible answers that fill in the gaps



# Tell the Truth

- Example 1: The US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan at the tail end of WWII.
- Question: Why?
- Various historical rationale and many people involved



# Tell the Truth



Be true to their characters

- o Example 2: How your parents/grandparents fell in love.
- o Question: What were their exact conversations?
- o Include their mannerisms, sayings, sense of humor, maybe small phrases – guess what they might have said



# Tell the Truth

## *Different Perspectives*

- o The same story can be told from different perspectives
- o Completely change good guys and bad guys



Vietnam War



American War



# Tell the Truth

## *Different Perspectives*

o Activity 1: Tell the story of each kid



- o Wants?
- o What's his/her conflict?

# Tell the Truth

## *Different Perspectives*

### o Activity 2: Burglar vs Victims



- o Wants?
- o What's his/her conflict?





# Digging into the Emotions

# Digging into the Emotions


- o Emotions are tricky things
  - o SHOW, don't tell!
- o Avoid flat statements of emotion:
  - o He felt sad.
  - o Happiness engulfed him.
  - o He was filled with joy.
- o Showing is far more powerful
  - o He pet his beloved Jack Russell for the last time as the nurse plunged the needle in. His eyes closed.



# Digging into the Emotions

- o Use all appropriate emotions, including...
  - o Humor (wit, funny situations, etc.)
  - o Anger
  - o Frustration
- o Be specific with actions and reactions
  - o Rather than: Clair watched him cried.
  - o Instead: Clair touched the tissue to his damp face, the way Mom used to touch her face as a child.

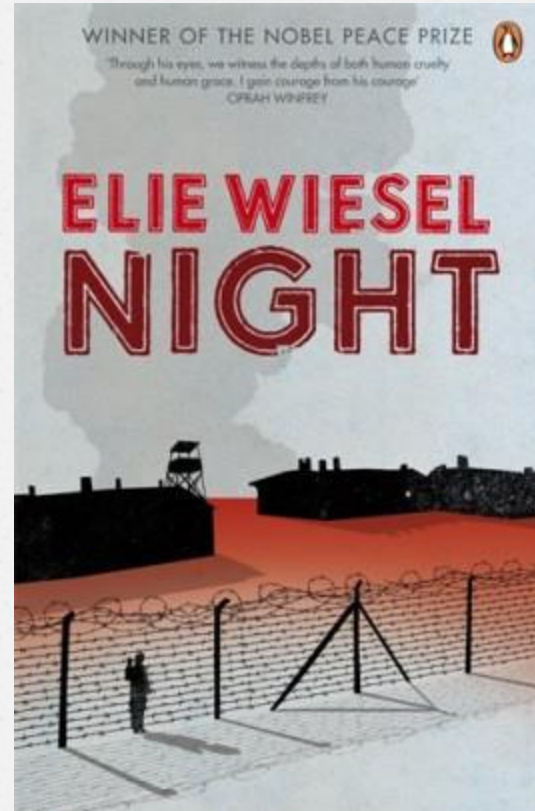
# Digging into the Emotions

- o For Creative Nonfiction, especially, emotions can be hard and painful
  - o Be bold
  - o Be fearless
- o ***#1 Goal: Make the reader feel what you/your characters feel*** 
- o Guide them through the experiences
- o Great works dig into emotion



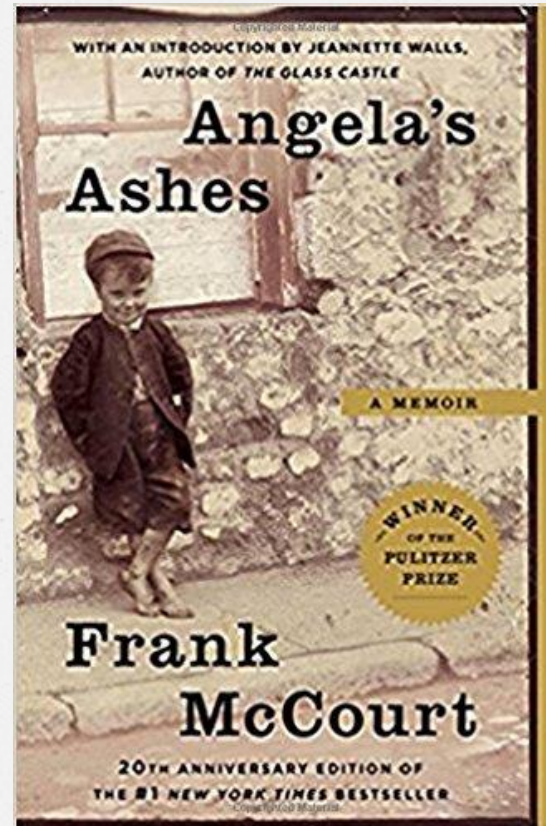
# Digging into the Emotions

- o Example: Night
  - o by Elie Wiesel
- o Novella that masters emotions subtly yet with extreme impact



# Digging into the Emotions

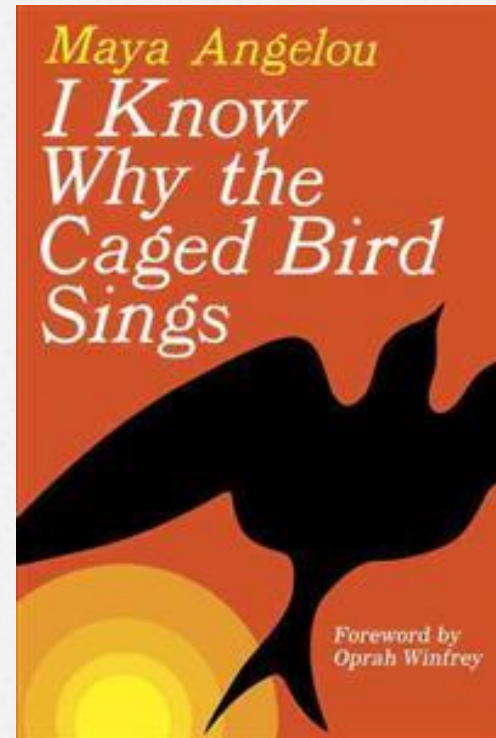
- o Example: Angela's Ashes
  - o by Frank McCourt
- o A rollercoaster of emotions
  - o Humor
  - o Excitement
  - o Anguish





# Digging into the Emotions

- o Example: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
  - o by Maya Angelou
- o Personal journey, but one that's relatable to many
  - o Racism
  - o Sexual Abuse
  - o Finding One's Self



# Digging into the Emotions

- o Activity: Sharing emotional moments





# Creative Nonfiction Workshop



o Thank you!

o Presentation posted here:  
[www.johnhopewriting.com](http://www.johnhopewriting.com)