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Telling the Truth: An Examination of Literary Ethics using *Welcome to My Country* and *The Liars Club*

“What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. I resolved to hide nothing from you “(Coates 111). Creative Nonfiction writers have a responsibility to tell the truth above all else, as the genre implies, even if it means omitting forgotten memories or confessing to artistic liberties to do so. Often, writers feel compelled to tell the truth so that they can grow into their own consciousness alongside their readers. Ethically speaking, writers of the genre owe it to their readers and their stories to never lie, as this is what distinguishes the genre from the rest. However, how do creative writers remain truthful while still writing a compelling creative story? Writing truthfully with a creative lens can be challenging as memory and artistic integrity rear their influential heads. To best practice truthful creative nonfiction, creative nonfiction writers must be truthful to themselves by practicing this awareness in their storytelling.

“The cardinal rule is clear-and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader-the maxim we live by the anchor of creative nonfiction: ‘You can’t make this stuff up!’” (Gutkind 7) Telling the truth as a creative nonfiction writer is vital, as it is the exact distinguishing characteristic that sets the genre apart from all the rest. However, it can be difficult to know just how to be truthful, when writers are just as human as everyone else. The best way to navigate the flaws that fault the truth, such as faulty memory, protecting real-life identities, or navigating old feelings or behaviors that were once forgotten, is to be self-aware

and forthcoming about one's human error to their readers. "The word "creative" in creative nonfiction has to do with how the writer conceives ideas, summarizes situations, defines personalities, describes places-and shapes presents information" (Gutkind 7). How a writer decides to present information will inherently affect whether it remains truthful or not, depending on whether the writer omits less desirable traits or experiences or alters memories for the benefit of the narrative arc or not. If a writer is truthful and ethically sound, they will only be interested in being as forthcoming as possible. Lauren Slater's *Welcome to My Country*, for instance, chooses to present her own mental health diagnosis at the end of the memoir, so that readers gather all the information, before planting doubt about her expertise when Slater shares truthful encounters about the mental health community. Another such writer who aims to remain self-aware and truthful is Mary Karr, whose memoir, *The Liars' Club*, is written exactly as Karr remembers it, and even tries to be self-aware to the conscience of her younger self as she retells her experiences.

One of the favorable aspects of Karr's writing is her ability to tell the story as she remembers it, while also not being afraid to showcase her own flaws to reiterate the accuracy of the experiences she shares. It is with this practice that she can share her memories, even though they are not exact, thanks to small liberties a writer must practice. For example, in Chapter Five of *The Liars Club*, when Karr's sister almost dies, and Karr reflects on her grandmother's death and her mother's shortcomings and its influence on her as a child, Karr doesn't shy away from telling the whole truth despite how it makes her appear. "I kept wielding the jellyfish on the pole at her. If anything, I was happy because I was really scaring her with it" (Karr 114). Mary's sister has a scare with death as the "man-of-war" tried to kill her when the two sisters were by the water and their parents were at the Breeze Inn in this scene. Instead of omitting or denying

her participation in hurting her sister right before a horrific life-threatening experience, Karr not only keeps her dangerous behavior in the story but highlights how she continues to taunt her sister until she realizes the gravity of her situation, as kids often do. This honesty helped to not only tell a more truthful story but also allows readers to really assess Mary at the age of this chapter and stay connected to her experiences as she has shortcomings in her own characterization. Her growth in the rest of the novel therefore is more apparent as other events continue to shape her and Karr remains diligent in sharing every wonderful or horrible thought and action as she feels it. Allowing for this memory to remain, Karr permits the memories for which she can't remember exactly, to be forgiven by the reader, as readers recognize how forthcoming Karr has been, and it allows for stronger trust and accountability between the writer and reader relationship within the memoir.

Slater's *Welcome to My Country* also aspires to remain truthful in her brutal honesty. The memoir was a beautiful mosaic of psychological research, personal exploration, and mental health stories that were not only moving but transformed a difficult topic to curate empathy which Lauren Slater mastered in her memoir. When describing Schizophrenia, Slater quotes W. Hall, G. Andrews, and G. Goldstein: "Schizophrenia is to psychiatry what cancer is to medicine: a sentence as well as a diagnosis" (Slater 15). Despite the stigmas associated, Slater does not shy away from the complexity of the patients she treats or the other illnesses she comes by. Her work remains truthful because Slater practices using both research and personal narrative to share her experiences on the topic of mental health. By implementing research, Slater allows readers to trust her honesty, as experts weigh into the work, she studied and experienced firsthand, rather than trusting Slater on her experiences alone. When describing her experiences, Slater is at times brutally honest in order to strive to be truthful in her writing. For example, when discussing her

patient, Oscar's story. Slater often describes him as vulgar and disgustingly fat throughout the novel. Slater's harsh assessments of Oscar's weight, hygiene, and behavior all were important incorporations that best planted a picture of Oscar's character to the reader. Her honesty rendered helpful as her relationship with Oscar bloomed throughout the memoir and readers learn more about Oscar's backstory. Oscar is a catatonic schizophrenic who in Slater's words: "...is the one who, in his very stillness, has moved me the most" (Slater 147). Slater describes him as the "Forty-one-year-old mustached man, the one who loves albinos and sketches empty skulls" (148). At the start of the memoir, readers are introduced to Oscar as the one who is "366 pounds and claiming constant blow jobs from such diverse females as the Queen of England and Chrissy, the Shih Tzu dog next door" (Slater 6). He is described as quite grotesque while also sharing some enduring interactions such as when Oscar sings with Slater, singing a "wonderful rendition of Sinatra, a song full of golden sands and blue skies" (Slater 21). Slater effectively creates empathy and honesty by providing a full complex assessment of Oscar's characterization and her experience with him by providing his file, examples of his struggles, his not-so-pleasant traits, and his best qualities. It is in this full mosaic, that readers get the full picture and a truer nonfiction depiction of mental illness.

Another instance where a nonfiction writer's self-awareness aided in their truth-telling occurred as Karr remained honest in *The Liars' Club* about her faulty memory. Karr often openly admits several times throughout the memoir that she either does not remember certain experiences or is honest that they are unclear when she does share them. Karr doesn't shy away from the fact she cannot remember everything but ultimately leans into it. At the start of the first chapter, for instance, Karr utilizes her memories' shortcomings as a way to bridge trust with readers and a report for the rest of the novel as a result. "Because it took so long for me to paste

together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for a while” (Karr 9).

Instances such as this occur throughout the entire novel and allow readers to recognize the humanity in the memoirist which makes the story that much more intriguing and engaging as details emerge, because the reader knows the memoirist is sharing them as accurately as they can possibly share them, making them more valid in their existence.

Within *The Art of Memoir*, Karr discusses other liberties she and other nonfiction writers must take to tell a compelling yet truthful story. In the final liberty of the rules she states, “...be generous and fair when you can; when you can’t, admit your disaffinity. My general idea is to keep the focus on myself and my own struggles, not speculate on other people’s motives, and not concoct events and characters out of whole cloth” (Karr 26). By focusing inward, Karr establishes truth, as there are less likely to be discrepancies between people in the real life of the memoirist and the other characters mentioned in the memoir if told through the memoir’s own lens, as people all have their own recollections of shared experiences. Karr’s list of liberties in *The Art of Memoir* is a helpful resource for writers to implement best practices when working to be as truthful yet compelling as possible in their writing.

Essentially the artistic liberties for truth-telling in *The Art of Memoir* listed lay out the following twelve tips: Phrase dialogue in ambiguous terms if memory fails, feel free to change names to protect the innocent but disclose such if possible, navigate out of chronological order if memory serves best this way, shape the narrative to keep the most relevant points at the forefront, add scenes through hearsay even if not directly experienced for depth, and write inward for the most clarity as all experiences are lived differently from person to person (Karr 26). Karr implements observation heavily in *The Liars’ Club*, just like *The Art of Memoir*

teaches, to be as self-aware and honest as possible. She does this by using a lot of observation to share memories rather than imposing thoughts or dialogue onto her other characters in her memories of the experiences she shares. After her sister survives her near-death experience, for example, Karr shares how as sisters do, she still gets on her nerves, after her relief dies down that she turned out okay. “I wished her dead again, Lecia. I sat in the dark among the sandy towels and damp bathing suits for nearly an hour before she finally left me out” (Karr 118). Without small liberties, a Memoir could not work logistically, however, without truthful writing, these liberties would not be acceptable either, so both must work hand in hand, as they do in Karr’s *The Liar’s Club*.

To best practice Creative Nonfiction, writers must implement self-awareness in their storytelling to remain truthful to themselves and the stories they tell. Writers must incorporate self-awareness by being as forthcoming as possible to the truth. Karr and Slater articulate these practices by being forward about faulty memories and overwhelmingly honest in their experience of other characters in their memoirs. They practice truthful storytelling by incorporating other research to further expand the topic of their work and by looking inward to present the best most honest perspective of their own experiences when sharing memories. Creative Nonfiction writers have a responsibility to tell the truth above all else, as the genre implies because without it, Creative Nonfiction would cease to exist at all. As Ta-Nehisi Coates said in *Between the World and Me*, be sure to grow into consciousness and resolve to hide nothing, as these stories will hold an important truth worth telling.

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