

In Providence: Creative Writing: Taking on the burden of the truth

If you read this column every week, you might have the same question they had for me: “*So how much of it is real?*”

My first in-person interview in a while was taking place outdoors during one of the warmer nights of the month with a fellow creative writer. The bar was busy. The rapid rate of vaccination seemed to be driving people out in full force. They contacted me because they like the “In Providence” column and they want to write something similar, but they’d always wondered how much of it was fact and how much was made up.

When I was in college, I took a course in non-fiction creative writing. Upon signing up for the class, I began to wonder how you could creatively write about non-fiction. I thought I was going to learn how to describe real life events with as much detail as possible. How to take the mundanity of everyday living and make it interesting. Back then, I was a stickler for objectivity. In my religious high school, I spent a significant amount of time being taught the difference between fact and opinion, and I was confident that the rest of my life would be dedicated to writing about the imaginary. After all, who would want to take on the burden of the truth?

Nevertheless, if someone could teach me how to make writing about the truth not seem so arduous, I was game. Within the first few minutes of the class, I was already the pariah. Any suggestion of altering events or people was met with a hearty objection from me. I felt that everything needed to be on the same level as journalism. Straightforward, no slanting, and no shaping a story to make it look the way you want it to. That was when my professor pointed me toward Truman Capote and *In Cold Blood*.

Much has been written about the process one of America’s most famous authors used when putting down on paper the story of a murder in Kansas and its aftermath, but I was taken aback as soon as I read about the genesis of the book.

Capote wanted to write about a murder in a small town. He knew what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. He even had ideas about what kind of murder it should be and what kind of murderers the culprits should be. Then he went looking for the crime.

I found this to be both distasteful and dishonest. A writer shouldn’t go looking for material with an eye on the final product, should they? How could Capote possibly maintain any integrity if he knew where he was going before he even got there?

When I reported back on the book to my professor, they asked me to consider that, yes, Capote probably made things up (he was famous for not taking notes), but that sometimes writing creatively isn’t about adding what’s not there, but dismissing what is that doesn’t serve the story you’d like to tell.

I continued to push back. *You shouldn’t want to tell a story. You should just tell the story that’s right in front of you.*

My professor was very kind. They pointed out that believing there’s only ever one story in front of you is

simplifying life down in the most transgressive of ways. Even the most respected of journalists have to have an angle, and artists, which is how I thought of myself, need to have a way in if they're going to do justice to a subject.

I'm sitting at a bar with another writer. What kind of story do I want to tell about her? What if it would help me to make her a man? Well, I can't just make her a man, can I? If I did that, you'd say I was making the story up. If I swapped her gender, and had her do all the same things, but as a man, you'd feel it was too big a change for the story to be considered factual. If you're as stingy as I was as a freshman in college who thought he knew everything about the world and the nature of the truth, you might suggest that *any* change would render the story fictional.

But if I told the entire story in a way that led you to believe I was having drinks with a man, but never came right out and said it. Are you one of those people who believe omission is a form of lying? Especially when the writer uses omission to lead you in another direction?

Two books jump to mind right away whenever somebody asks me about writing non-fiction. One is a book I've written about very recently, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which, ironically, has a Capote connection. One of the young children in the book is based on little Truman. In fact, a lot of the book is based in reality, but Harper Lee decided to call it fictional. It's possible she did not want to bear the burden of truth. Being willing to label something fictional means you can say whatever you want and write however you like ... or does it?

Why do we only place responsibility on those claiming to write about what's true as though fiction can't do a significant amount of damage on its own?

The other book I think about is *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey. After being chosen as an Oprah's Book Club selection, Frey's "memoir" was revealed to be mostly made up. He then had to go on an apology tour, wherein he was frequently asked why he didn't just label the book "fiction."

The answer? Because it's not a very good book. The standards for writing fiction are way higher than that of non-fiction. While the truth is a burden, fiction still carries its own weight. Frey had no luck selling what he had written as a novel, but when he started telling people it was true, there was an interest.

I remember thinking it was a shame that we didn't use that crisis in the literary world to have a bigger conversation about why a poorly written book somehow becomes lauded text as soon as it's presented as something that's "true."

Recently when discussing Netflix's *The Queen's Gambit* with a friend, she remarked that while she loved the series, "*I really wish it was a true story.*"

When pressed, she couldn't quite articulate why it being fictional bothered her. To her, the show had strived for such heightened naturalism, and succeeded in it, all the while dabbling in history and historical context, that it felt like it should be attached to reality in some way.

"I just think I would have enjoyed it more."

In the late '90s and early aughts, reality television became so popular that people started to wonder if fiction was on the way out. People seemed to feel as though anything created was lacking in some way,

and the overused chant of “Truth is stranger than fiction” was used as a battering ram against every article of culture that wasn’t a documentary or an episode of *Survivor*. Lately, that thirst for the real has died down a bit, even as it’s becoming clearer and clearer that in some ways, yes, creativity often has a hard time keeping up with what we see and hear in our daily lives.

But this isn’t meant to be an essay. The “In Providence” column is supposed to be something else. It’s a place to tell stories. Like the story of me getting a drink with another writer who wants to know if I just make up what I write every week out of what would have to be the endless depths of my ingenuity.

And, you know, in some ways, I wish I could tell you I did. Being able to think up nearly 90 stories of love, heartache, loneliness, friendship, sex, and feuding Christmas decorations would be a pretty impressive feat, but...

Even the best writers would have trouble keeping up with the demand.

Instead, I’ve taken the Capote route. The author I once lambasted has become something of an inspiration. I explain to the writer I’m having drinks with, a very handsome writer-

(You see how I can lead you into thinking it’s a man by using “handsome” while not lying? Women can be called “handsome,” but it’s a word we often associate with a man. If I keep using the “they” pronoun, then you could just fill in the rest for me, couldn’t you?)

-I explain that I typically come up with ideas for the column about two months ahead of time.

This week I want to write about someone moving back to Providence after a long time away. This week I want to write about a pizza delivery boy and religion. This week I want to write about a marriage proposal and the southern part of the city. Then I go looking. Oftentimes, it’s not hard to find what you need, provided you’re willing to trim away everything you *don’t* need.

People come to you with all the complexities necessary to make them look however you want, and it’s your job (or, I suppose, my job) to decide who it is they’re going to be.

In the very first profile I wrote about a woman I labeled “*The Queen of Providence*,” I heard a lot of admirable things about my subject, but I’m sure, if I wanted to, I could have asked around and found at least a few people she had wronged. If I then took those accounts and centered the story around them, or even peppered them in here and there, you might have had a very different reaction to reading about that woman. What I wanted was a feel-good, uplifting piece about somebody trying to make a difference without asking for any fanfare. That did exist in the person I found, but that’s not all that was there.

Anonymity makes all this a lot easier, because there does seem to be a responsibility that arises when you use someone’s name. The absence of identity became the sugar I take with my medicine, because there is still that small voice in the back of my head saying “*Something about this isn’t right. You’re not mentioning that the couple who met and fell in love recently separated. You didn’t talk about how that charming man you met was unkind to the waiter. Wait, if you don’t talk about how they only went inside the house because it was raining, you’re not being **totally truthful.***”)

I understand why we’re all so fixated on truth. We live in a society where millions of people believe climate change isn’t real and there’s a sex trafficking ring being run out of the basement of a pizza parlor. Truth is under attack, you won’t get any argument from me on that. But what of the hall pass we

give to fiction?

And what do we do about the fact that while labeling something fiction gives the author lenience, it also guarantees that you are far less likely to engage with whatever it is they come up with? You can feel the temptation there, can't you? It's like something out of Faust.

Say you're lying, and you can lie as much as you want, but nobody will listen to you, because what you're saying is a lie. Tell the truth and it needs to be the purest of truths, which people will then listen to, only because many of them want to find out if you're lying, and if they catch you, you have to beg for Oprah's forgiveness.

I'm getting drinks with another writer. The author in me kicks in-Who, What, Where, When, Why. Each of those things has multiple answers. This person is a writer. She's a woman. She's single. She's pretty. She's single and pretty. Why is she single if she's pretty? Well, there are lots of single people who are also pretty. I should ask her about that though. I should ask her if she enjoys being single. Maybe I don't need to mention that she's a writer at all. Maybe it's not important. Maybe this column is about a woman having a drink downtown and she suddenly talks about a man she met who broke her heart.

We did talk about a man who broke her heart. That part is true. And the part about her being single, and a woman. But that wasn't why we were there. And we only talked about the man and the broken heart for 20 minutes. But 20 minutes is enough for 1,000 words, and that's enough for one of these weekly columns.

This woman is fascinating. That's true. I could write seven columns about her. She's made up of many, many stories. The question is:

Which one of them would I want to tell?