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In times of crisis, flux and uncertainty, the audience for works of non-fiction increases (Gerard 1997: 3). The years of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have certainly been such a period of such political and social insecurity and sales of non-fiction books have, indeed, soared. During this time, the Internet and other multimedia technologies have, moreover, fostered an explosion in the amount of information available to the point where the phrase 'information overload' has become a cliché. Readers are also increasingly aware that much of this mass of information has had some degree of public relations 'spin' applied to it, just as they know that many previously respected sources of information – such as governments, organised religions and the press – have been exposed as having falsified, exaggerated or invented material and presented this to the public as fact. This set of circumstances has resulted in an unprecedented cynicism on the part of consumers of information, with the reliability of information a highly valued feature for readers of texts of all kinds.

Certainly, consumers of works classified as non-fiction, while not naïvely believing everything in these texts, read such works with an understanding that they will contain reliable – that is, trustworthy – information. These readers trust non-fiction writers not to manufacture or alter the truth as those writers understand it, just as these readers trust reputable publishing houses to commission, edit and publish material that is worthy of bearing the non-fiction label. Although, of course, no author can ever completely represent the intricate complexity of reality in writing, writers of non-fiction must nevertheless strive for the highest levels of verifiable accuracy in their work to attract and maintain the trust of their readership.

In this context, the genre of non-fiction writing known as creative nonfiction has become a primary locus for debate about the authenticity of literature of all kinds, as well as a focus for what seems to be a general critical anxiety that seemingly often prompts these discussions. Moreover, as each exposé of the latest literary scandal leaks from the book pages of the broadsheet press into public consciousness, creative nonfiction is increasingly often held 'responsible' for such scandal-producing texts. This is because, such accusations claim, the genre creates a shadowy and even purposefully deceitful literary space where the core principles of non-fiction writing (such as truth-telling and exhaustive research) are complexly and impossibly compromised. Yet, when analysed, the majority of literary scandals, as well as those that provoke the most outrage, involve the exposure of either (or both) of the following simple contraventions of readers' expectations of truthfulness and reliability: some deliberate fabrication or falsehood in an ostensibly non-fiction work and/or the blatant misrepresentation of his or her authenticating identity by its author. A recent example illustrates this point.

The case of Glenn G. Boyer

In 2000, the University of Arizona Press (UAP) announced it would no longer publish or sell *I Married Wyatt Earp: The Recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, collected and edited by Glenn G. Boyer* (Tombstone Tumbleweed reporter 2000: n.p.) – a book UAP had first published in 1976 and which, by 1999, having sold more than 36,000 copies, had become one of its highest selling texts (Sharlet 1999: n.p.). Controversy over the work began in the early 1990s when a number of historians articulated their doubts about the existence of the collection of the third Mrs. Earp's writings and memoirs that Boyer claimed to have utilised. The scandal climaxed in 1998 when a journalist revealed that not only had Boyer invented a significant amount of his source material and UAP knew these sources were suspect, but that the publisher had asked him to embellish upon and fictionalise part of the memoir (Ortega 1998, in Albanese 2000: n.p.). When criticised for not being able to produce the relevant documentation, Boyer stated: 'My work is beginning to be recognized by all but a few fanatics and their puppets as a classic example of the newly recognized genre creative nonfiction' (Decker 1999: n.p.). He also noted that he was not the first person to employ a 'nontraditional' literary device when writing about the frontier (Decker 1999: n.p.). In another article, Boyer claimed he was a 'novelist, and a damn good one', but then added that he was working in the genre of creative nonfiction (Albanese 2000: n.p.). When, as part of this confused defence, he cited Pulitzer Prize winner Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) as a similar case, Boyer seemed unaware of the difference between his own work – that of (supposedly) collecting historical materials for, and then editing, what would become a primary source document – and Morris's highly experimental biography which clearly signalled the inclusion of recognisably fictional passages into otherwise traditionally sourced and referenced text.

Picking up on Boyer's creative nonfiction 'excuse', press reports of the scandal equated creative nonfiction with fictional (that is, invented), rather than non-fiction, narratives. Thus, in an otherwise insightful article in *Salon.com*, Andrew Albanese asked: 'why then would the University of Arizona Press choose to publish the book as a work of history, rather than a work of creative nonfiction?' and, 'is the invention of fictional sources part of the ruse involved in making "creative nonfiction?"' (2000: n.p.). A report in the *Tombstone Tumbleweed* the next month similarly incorrectly characterised creative nonfiction as 'a difficult-to-define term that often refers to the inclusion of fictional material upon a factual foundation' (2000: n.p.). The Earp descendants who had loaned some historical material to Boyer similarly stated, 'Mr. Boyer now claims that *I Married Wyatt Earp* is creative nonfiction when he has always led our family to believe it as a true account and memoir of Josephine Earp' (quoted by Tombstone Tumbleweed reporter 2000: n.p.). However, as soon as Boyer invented source manuscripts, fabricated elements of the story and presented his own speculations as historical fact, he was not writing creative nonfiction but historical fiction – that is, fiction based on historical events. His claims, as some of the comments that followed, confused creative nonfiction's characteristic stylistic feature – that of utilising literary, artistic, openly subjective and, therefore, 'creative' means of expression – with an

authority to introduce deliberate falsehoods into a text. Unlike Boyer's inventions (which have been used and cited in later histories), works of creative nonfiction do not falsify or pollute the historical record or taint its producers (writers and publishers) with charges of fakery (Decker 1999: n.p.), fraud (Albanese 2000: n.p.) and 'impeding the cause of knowledge' (Sharlet 1999: A19).

Creative nonfiction, to the contrary, is defined by a complete reliance on the foundational truth-telling tenets of non-fiction writing. The 'creative' part of the term describes only the literary devices writers may utilise in telling their non-fiction narratives, not how 'creative' their interpretation of the term 'non-fiction' can be, for this interpretation is non-negotiable. In contrast to the puzzlement the name often provokes in those unfamiliar with the genre, there is nothing paradoxical about the relationship of its two parts. Moreover, any confusion regarding whether working under the label of creative nonfiction allows the writer to manufacture or invent material and then sell these confections as 'truth' is completely dispelled by considering the genre's foundational definitions.

Lee Gutkind, the first to teach creative nonfiction at university level (Gutkind 2005: xxviii) has, in the ensuing thirty years, remained uncompromising when it comes to the factual data that forms the foundation for all non-fiction writing. In his key text, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*, Gutkind states incontrovertibly that: 'Names, dates, places, descriptions, quotations may not be created or altered for any reason at any time' (1997: 10). In the first editorial to *Creative Nonfiction* (the first, and longest running, journal of the genre), Gutkind explains at length how the non-fiction status of creative nonfiction is sacrosanct, with the 'creative' in the genre's name referring only, and wholly, to the 'unique and subjective focus, concept, context and point of view in which the information is presented and defined' (1993: 2). Although sharing certain literary devices with fiction (such as description, use of dialogue and the creation of a series of scenes) to narrate this factual data, Gutkind emphasises how creative nonfiction differs from fiction 'because it is necessarily and scrupulously accurate and the presentation of information ... is paramount' (15). Indeed, Gutkind has identified creative nonfiction's relationship to the real as the very source of its power: 'creative nonfiction ... has teeth because it is true, and because it is true it can change lives and shape opinion' (quoted in Brien 2000: n.p.).

The case of James Frey

In early January 2006, one of the year's first major literary news stories was the international syndication of *The New York Times*' report that James Frey's sensational memoir of addiction and recovery, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), had been the second best selling US book in 2005. With more than 1.77 million paperback copies sold that year, Frey's work – an Oprah Winfrey Book Club choice – was only bettered in number of sales by J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) (Reuters 2006: n.p.). Less than a week later, a lengthy report in the investigative online journal, *The Smoking Gun*, which was also picked up and cited in publications across the globe, revealed that Frey had invented much of his memoir (Smoking Gun reporter, 2006). It is now common knowledge that many key elements of his narrative were

completely fictional, including dramatic scenes of assaulting a number of policemen, being charged with multiple offences including cocaine possession and serving a three month prison sentence. Instead, police documents and sources have revealed that not only was Frey never charged with assault, no drugs were involved in the matter police questioned him about, and he was released after paying a small (US\$733) cash bond. *The Smoking Gun* quotes Frey as invoking creative nonfiction ‘license’ in a similar way to Boyer, admitting that he ‘embellished’ a number of details in the book for ‘obvious dramatic reasons’ (Smoking Gun reporter 2006: 1), a claim he later repeated on both *Larry King Live* (CNN transcription services 2006) and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Maul 2006b, n.p.). This point was picked up in a number of later press articles and used to illustrate the slippery complexity of creative nonfiction as a form of writing which, it was widely agreed, provides authors with an opportunity to unethically distort reality but still be published under the popular-with-readers umbrella genre of non-fiction. A *Chicago Tribune* article, for instance, quoted Samuel G. Freedman, professor of journalism at Columbia University and author of five non-fiction books, as stating that creative non-fiction is a ‘fuzzy genre ... that’s often abused by unethical writers ... These writers ... want the power of non-fiction – saying to the reader, “This is true” – but they also want the ability to invent’ (WTP syndicated report 2006: n.p.).

A survey of hundreds of postings to discussion lists on *Amazon.com* in the days following *The Smoking Gun* exposé suggests that, to the contrary, the issues involved were – at least for readers of the book – relatively simple. These readers were, without any difficulty, able to clearly differentiate between fact (what actually happened) and fiction (what an author invents) – a distinction that seemed to evade both Frey and Boyer. In numerous postings, these readers expressed the view that while they understood that representing every detail of a whole life in a book is impossible both conceptually and practically, the creative nonfiction writer (as all writers of non-fiction) must recognise, and not transgress, the clear line between recreation and fabrication (as is also discussed in Gutkind, 1997 and Cheney 1991: 189). These readers appear, indeed, to have a clear understanding of what Kendall L. Walton proposes is the function of all works of art: ‘to serve as props in games of make-believe’ (53). The reader’s experience of being emotionally involved in a text – in Walton’s terms ‘being caught up in a story’ – is experienced by audiences of both fiction and non-fiction works, but while fiction readers ‘do not ... really believe in the fiction’ (6), readers of non-fiction engage with such works principally because they are seeking some truth about the real world that they can believe in. In vivid illustration of this, one reader posted: ‘I picked up this book so it could help me better understand my brother who is an addict and who has suicidal tendencies. Now I feel I have to discount everything Mr. Frey says in his book (‘Rivet’ 2006: n.p.). While Frey’s eventual excuse of memory’s fallibility was totally unacceptable to readers – ‘How can one’s memory invent a non-existent 3 month stay in prison?’ (Gardner 2006: n.p.) – readers also clearly identified Frey’s twin motivations: that his story was only powerful if it was creative nonfiction – that is, ‘experience rather than fiction’ (‘Scott’ 2006: n.p) – and he wanted to harness that power of the true life story to sell his book: ‘Frey sold a story of falsehoods because the simple truth is far less inspiring’ (Lopez 2006: n.p.).

While a small minority of Frey's readers expressed the opinion that his work still retained some value (especially in its redemptive message of rehabilitation and recovery from addiction) most argued that even the power of this universal theme was undermined by Frey's distortion of the truth of what happened to him as an individual. In specific relation to this theme, a number of readers were particularly angered that Frey, who claimed he had overcome his addictions through willpower alone, had urged other addicts to abandon the various, proven 12-step programs. In various outpouring of considerable distress, readers confirmed how the power of a life story, truthfully told, dissolved once Frey's 'embellishments' were revealed: 'Regardless of what literary experts may say ... the general public automatically views "memoir" as fact ... I was so impressed with this reading up until the recent events, now I consider it a big joke' (Boston 2006: n.p.). Once Frey, as narrator and author, and his text, as story, were thus revealed as unreliable, all Gutkind's power to 'change lives and shape opinion' also vanished.

Readers were not the only participants in this drama to feel betrayed once the truth was revealed. Three days after *The Smoking Gun* story was published, Frey was interviewed on CNN's *Larry King Live*. At this time, he defended his work by repeatedly referring to his addiction, which, he felt, lay at the core of his work (CNN transcription services 2006: n.p.). At the end of the interview, Oprah Winfrey confirmed (by telephone) her support for Frey because what mattered to her, she said, was not the truth of the book – 'Whether or not the cars' wheels rolled up on the sidewalk or whether he hit the police officer or didn't hit the police officer is irrelevant to me' (CNN transcription services 2006: n.p.) – but its value in helping addicts. Two weeks later, on the 26th of January, however, when Frey admitted on her show that he had fabricated whole portions of the book, Winfrey stated that she felt 'really duped' and that Frey had 'betrayed millions of readers'. She then apologised for her statement on *Larry King Live*, stating: 'I left the impression that the truth does not matter, and I am deeply sorry about that. That is not what I believe' (Memmott 2006: n.p.). By the end of the month, it had also become a matter of the public record that Frey's agent had decided to no longer represent him, giving her reason as: 'it became impossible for me to maintain a relationship once the trust had been broken' (Nelson 2006: n.p.).

The case of Dan Brown

It has become a cliché to state that Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, is a publishing phenomenon. With some 60.5 million copies in print (as of May 2006) and translation into 44 languages (Wikipedia 2006, n.p.), *The Da Vinci Code* has dominated the top rungs of *The New York Times* bestselling lists since its publication in March 2003. Alongside reanimating sales of Brown's earlier (and relatively indifferently received) three novels, *The Da Vinci Code* has also spawned an industry of exegetical responses. Ranging from Bart D. Ehrman's detailed and scholarly *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (2004), published by Oxford University Press, to those undoubtedly rushed to press to cash in on public interest in the novel, there are, at present, more than a dozen books in print about Brown's novel. The Catholic Church has launched a website to provide *The Da Vinci Code* readers with 'accurate information' about St

Mary Magdalene (Ward 2005: n.p.); and Winchester Cathedral (where part of the eponymous film was shot) has installed an exhibition and, in the Summer of 2006, is hosting an associated series of lectures under the title *Cracking the Code: The Holy Mystery Beyond The Da Vinci Code*. There are many other such sites of commentary, the majority of which focus on proving the book to be a hoax which distorts and fabricates history by disproving its factual content. All these commentaries treat the novel as a work of creative nonfiction; in this case, correctly aligning creative nonfiction with non-fiction (and, therefore, truth-telling) but incorrectly identifying Brown's novel as a work of non-fiction. The majority of these works, such as Hannegraaff and Maier's *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* (2004), Olsen and Miesel's *The Da Vinci Hoax – Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code* (2004) and Welborn's *De-Coding DaVinci: The Facts Behind the Fiction of The Da Vinci Code* (2004) include implicit references to truth (and seeking it out) in their titles.

Yet, the book's publisher, Doubleday, clearly catalogues and promotes the book as fiction, and Brown's own answer to the first question in the Frequently Asked Questions section of his website – 'How much of this novel is true?' – is unambiguous:

The Da Vinci Code is a novel and therefore a work of fiction. While the book's characters and their actions are obviously not real, the artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals depicted in this novel all exist ... These real elements are interpreted and debated by fictional characters ... each individual reader must explore these characters' viewpoints and come to his or her own interpretations (Brown 2006: n.p.).

This extensive website, indeed, lists only five 'Bizarre True Facts' from this book. These are that many believe Da Vinci hidden secret messages in his artwork'; that a British chapel has a ceiling carved with a series of undecoded symbols and a sealed subterranean vault; that Opus Dei has recently constructed an American Headquarters in New York City; that most of the security cameras at the Louvre Museum in Paris do not work; and that the nuns who commissioned Da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks* were unhappy with this painting and so he created a second version (Brown 2006). In line with this paucity of factual matter, and although the frequently-cited *Catholic.com* website claims that 'many readers – both Catholic and non-Catholic – are taking the book's ideas seriously' (Catholic Answers 2004: n.p.), the hundreds of readers' reviews and postings to discussion forums on *Amazon.com* reveal little evidence that readers 'believe' in any sense in Brown's fiction. On the contrary, these postings suggest that these readers are consuming this book as a historically-based thriller that, in common with many works of this genre, utilises, as Lucy Mangan notes, 'elements of real life' including architectural, geographical and 'other truths' for the purpose of lending 'verisimilitude to his [Brown's] lurid imaginings' and 'construct[ing] a pacy narrative' (2004: n.p.).

Although readers thus seem highly aware of the status of *The Da Vinci Code* as fiction, the anxiety it has nevertheless produced (as evidenced by the number and range of responses seeking to disprove it) testifies to the power of non-fictional techniques and devices (as those used by Brown) to lend truth-telling authenticity to even the most overtly fictional works.

Conclusion

Creative nonfiction, as Gutkind has stated, draws its power from the non-fiction truths it tells. The genre similarly draws its popularity from its audience's positive response to the compelling and engaging ways it relays these truths. Readers trust creative nonfiction writers to uphold the foundational truth-telling tenets of all non-fiction and, indeed, the very viability of creative nonfiction as an increasingly accepted, and mainstream, genre may depend on readers continuing to believe that it can offer them reliable, trustworthy, information. While the often-gruesome press exposés of literary scandals undeniably provide a measure of *schadenfreude* delight (that of taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others) for readers of the weekend literary pages, these scandals have the potential to injure the reputations of the authors, editors, publishers and other literary workers involved in them and, when works of creative nonfiction are implicated, to test the reading public's trust in the entire genre of creative nonfiction. Yet, what is so difficult for contemporary writers and publishers of the genre is that many of the texts at the heart of such scandals (and which, then, may threaten the genre's future) are actually not works of creative nonfiction at all. As in the cases of Boyer and Frey discussed above, frauds and falsehoods can be perpetrated by those who seek to misuse creative nonfiction's powerful label for their own benefit. There are even, as in the example of *The Da Vinci Code*, complete misunderstandings about creative nonfiction's definitional distinction from works of fiction – and especially those which, as in Brown's case, manage to powerfully manufacture a sense of reality in their fictional worlds.

Writers of creative nonfiction must, therefore, not only seek an ethical approach to their own practice, always keeping the power of non-fiction truth-telling at the forefront of their work. There is much at stake, it seems, for these writers to also take an active interest in commenting upon the frauds and hoaxes that increasingly blame creative nonfiction for unethical non-fictional practices and those who misrepresent the genre in a range of ways.

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