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# True Stories, Well Told

BY MARY S. GILBERT  
PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN



Issues of *Creative Nonfiction* (right) dating back 20 years fill the shelves at the literary organization's Shadyside office (above).

## Creative Nonfiction Has Been Keeping It Real for 20 Years

**T**wenty years ago, a battle raged within literary circles. It was a war of words over the genre known as creative nonfiction.

Nonfiction writers were increasingly presenting information in vivid, unconventional ways in order to attract a broader readership to a wide range of subjects, but not everyone was buying it. Not, that is, until East End resident Lee Gutkind took matters into his own hands.

The genre—in which writers employ a technique variously referred to as experiential reportage, immersion, or true storytelling—already had a distinguished history. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* are well-known examples. By inserting themselves into situations with their subjects and using a first-person narrative, those authors and others like them made their subjects come alive, communicating ideas and emotions along with information.

The so-called New Journalism that originated in the 1960s and '70s was also very influential to the evolution of creative nonfiction. Several prominent magazines—notably *The New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*—actually employed novelists to cover news stories for them, producing articles that read like short stories.

But many journalists scorned the idea. To them, creativity implied fabrication rather than fact and smacked of sensational yellow journalism. Some journalists also resented infringement on their turf, and nearly all of them were



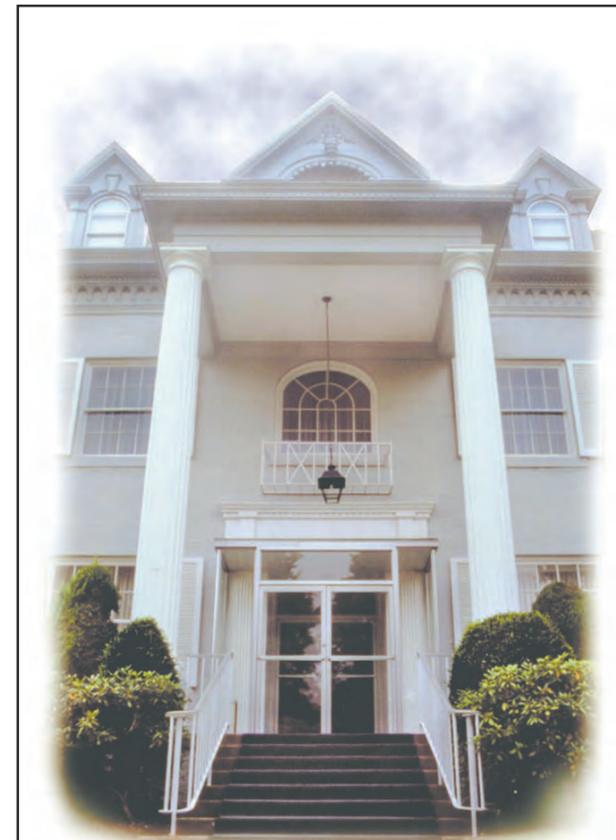
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## True Stories, Well Told

shocked by the disregard for journalism's traditional third-person voice.

Academics also fumed at the prospect of change. The idea of reducing scholarly research to stories was viewed with alarm as dumbing down important information.

Enter Lee Gutkind with a plan to forge peace. A creative nonfiction writer himself, Gutkind in the 1990s was a member of the English department at the University of Pittsburgh when he launched the groundbreaking literary journal *Creative Nonfiction* from the dining room table of his home in Squirrel Hill. Its mission was to convey "true stories, well told," nonfiction stories that read like fiction, enthralling readers with real events to the same extent as contrived ones.

"My idea was to make the connection to academics by publishing a journal that looked boring like other technical and literary journals," Gutkind explains. "It was my attempt to make people look at these stories as true literature and art-like."

According to Gutkind, creative nonfiction is "the literary equivalent of jazz, in that it's a rich mix of flavors, ideas, voices, and technique, some newly invented, and others as old as writing itself."

Initially, the going was rocky, as the fledgling publication fought for funding, acceptance, legitimacy, and influence, both with journalists and inside academia, primarily in English departments. But it succeeded in making people wake up and understand that there was and is a market for this type of writing.

Twenty years and 53 issues later, a sea change is evident. Now, Gutkind says, creative nonfiction is the fastest-growing genre in the publishing industry and is accelerating in the academic world. More scientists, engineers, physicians, economists, lawyers, and governmental entities are turning their work into narratives. Even corporations and politicians are in on the act. Universities around the world grant degrees in creative nonfiction, and some medical schools teach courses in narrative medicine.

"Research shows that the human brain is wired for stories, and that people understand more information and remember it longer when it's communicated within a story," Gutkind says.

Now, *Creative Nonfiction* is published quarterly, illustrated, and in color. Issues go to

4,000 subscribers around the world (many of whom are aspiring writers) and to bookstores, Barnes & Noble among them. Whole Foods Market is a relatively new outlet, brought into the mix to attract a larger educated audience outside academia. The magazine is especially popular in Australia and New Zealand, but remains firmly rooted in the East End of Pittsburgh, with headquarters above Henne Jewelers on Walnut Street.

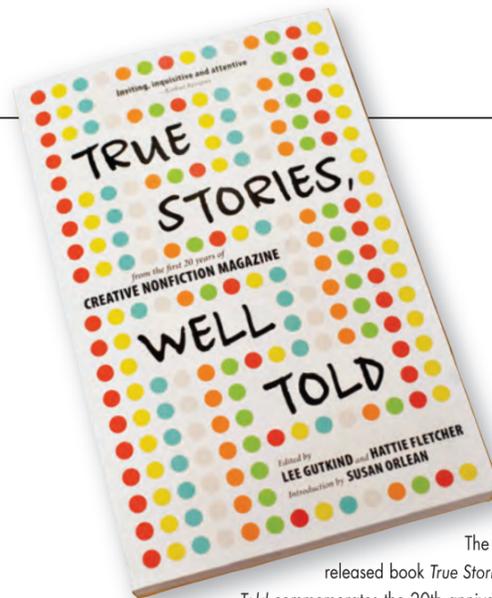
Hattie Fletcher, managing editor of the journal, explains that ShadySide has "a nice energy," and is conveniently located between the University of Pittsburgh and Chatham University. Chatham, she notes, has greatly expanded its writing program and serves as a steady source of interns that staff the *Creative Nonfiction* operations.

One former intern is Rebecca Skloot, the narrative science writer who penned *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, about the discovery and exploitation of the HeLa cells that transformed medical research. The book topped *The New York Times* bestseller list and was named by more than 60 critics as one of the best books of 2010.

Many of the journal's contributors, including Lauren Slater (*Prozac Diary*) and Mark Bowden (*The Finish: The Killing of Osama bin Laden*), have become superstars of the genre.



Lee Gutkind



The recently released book *True Stories, Well Told* commemorates the 20th anniversary of *Creative Nonfiction* by featuring 20 of the literary journal's best essays.

The magazine is something of a hybrid, with essays, columns about the writing life or the craft of nonfiction, and roundups of book reviews. Each issue is usually built around a theme: mistakes, sustainability, women writers, and stories of survival are some recent examples. In addition to the magazine, the *Creative Nonfiction* franchise includes an online school (with some 250 students annually) and an independent book imprint called In Fact Books.

To commemorate 20 years of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, In Fact Books has released *True Stories, Well Told*, which features 20 of the literary journal's best essays—ones that Gutkind and Fletcher describe as "the stories that have stuck with us and that we've been unable to forget." The book also includes a new piece by Gutkind called "The Fine Art of Literary Fist-Fighting," in which he offers his unique perspective on the evolution of his favorite genre and the heartbreaks and rewards of literary publishing.

Gutkind—upon whom *Vanity Fair* magazine bestowed the title of "godfather of creative nonfiction"—divides his time between residences in ShadySide and Tempe, Arizona, where he is a distinguished-writer-in-residence at Arizona State University and a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Communications. He still edits the magazine he founded two decades ago, but spends much of his time lecturing and leading conferences and workshops around the world to spread the gospel of creative nonfiction. Gutkind predicts the power of story will become even more important and relevant, particularly regarding the complexities of science policy.

"*Creative Nonfiction* changed minds," he says. "It's why we're alive after 20 years and growing like mad." SA

For more information or to purchase *True Stories, Well Told*, visit [creativenonfiction.org](http://creativenonfiction.org).

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