

An Interview from River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative "On Voice Prints, Ghost Thoughts, and Plates Set Spinning"

with Gretchen Clark



Gretchen Clark: What do you consider to be the essentials of creating a solid work of short nonfiction?

Rebecca McClanahan: Everything is subservient to the text itself, which means that the essentials change from essay to essay. What is essential to one piece may not be important at all to another. One work might be voice driven; another might be driven by character or place; another, by theme. What a writer must do, I suppose--at least this is what I try to do as I write and revise--is to locate the essential character of the text that is trying to come forth. I believe it is Patricia Hampl who suggests that we must learn how to read our drafts as mysteries. I imagine this stage of the process as a conversation with the work-in-progress. In essence, I ask the draft, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I try to abide by its wishes rather than to force upon it my original intent. Of course, this is only what I strive to do. Quite often, I fail.

GC: Is there a moment in a short piece that you find yourself looking for as a writer, teacher, and reader?

RM: I am looking for a moment in which the work turns on itself in some way. Even in a short piece, something must change between the first sentence and

the last; the work cannot be static. I think of this as a change in the wind or a vibration point, a place where, to paraphrase the artist Anne Truitt, the work “trembles” on its way to becoming “an entity.” This shift doesn’t have to be a huge epiphany. In fact, I doubt that a brief piece of nonfiction can support the kind of leap one might make in a longer essay or a book-length text. Sometimes this vibration point is hidden somewhere in the text, and the writer’s job becomes to locate it and to bring it into the light. Sometimes the draft simply has not found its other self, that ghost thought or word or character or theme which, if discovered, could complete it. I often find this other element within the pages of a completely different, unfinished draft, perhaps something that at first glance did not seem to be connected at all to what I am working on, but which turns out to be the exact piece of the puzzle that the other draft lacked. That’s why I rarely throw away “failed” drafts. I might need them someday.

GC: Do you feel writers need to approach writing the short piece differently than the longer, more traditional personal essay?

RM: Oh yes. The two forms are so different from each other that they seem almost to live in separate universes. They are different life forms, requiring different atmospheres in which to move and breathe, different support systems. In a brief piece, you’re aiming in part for what Judith Kitchen calls a distinctive “voice print,” and often this voice alone can sustain a brief piece. Brief essays are also more forgiving of the odd or unusual idea, the idiosyncratic structure (like the use of the second person, for example, which is hard to sustain in a long work), or the lyric leaps of thought and feeling that might come to feel forced or artificial in the longer work. The long, braided, narrative-driven essays that comprise most of my body of work often require years of drafting, revising, redrafting, research, cutting and pasting, reshaping, rethinking, then going back to the drawing board. Sometimes the shorter pieces require lots of revision, also. But the revision is of a different quality, more like the type of revision a poem requires. The brief nonfiction piece, to my mind, lives closer to poetry than to the form of the longer essay.

GC: Are there any elements of poetical writing that can be implemented in writing a short essay?

RM: The leaps of thought are similar, perhaps. Like some poems, some brief essays eschew the use of overt transitions and other connective tissue in favor of the “follow the brush” technique borrowed from Japanese art. Also, in a short essay, as in a poem, every single word matters. Of course, every word also matters in a long essay or in a book-length memoir, but the condensed quality of the short essay causes its reader to focus more on individual words and phrases, to their placement, their sounds, to the musical score that runs beneath

the words themselves.

GC: What about the need to wrap things up in a succinct essay? Do we go about this differently in a shorter piece of nonfiction?

RM: I am not a fan of “wrapping up” in any form--not in my long essays, my poems, or my brief nonfiction pieces. Many years ago, I stopped using the word “endings” to characterize those last few gestures in successful texts; I started calling them “openings.” Of course that doesn’t mean that a writer can’t use a traditional form of ending, even a bald statement of theme or meaning. Any technique can work, I tell my students, if it works: simple as that. However, in most cases I feel that the most satisfying works of literature are those in which the reader (not the writer) supplies that final wrap-up, if that’s what you want to call it. The reader completes the transaction that has been set in motion very carefully, though not always consciously, by the writer. Once all the plates are spinning, so to speak, at the right speeds and at the right angles, there is a moment in which the work is as alive as it will ever get. On those rare occasions when that moment occurs in my writing, I try to get my writer’s self out of the scene as quickly as possible. I try to resist the temptation to remind the reader--or, worse, to explain to him--what he’s just seen or heard or felt.

GC: What techniques do you use to help your creative nonfiction students open up and get their true voices down on paper?

workshops--is not all it’s cracked up to be. People on Oprah and other talk shows open up all the time; perhaps they even find their true voices. But that doesn’t mean they’ve created an artful text. And creating an artful text is what we’re trying to do, I believe, when we set out to put our true voices down on paper. We are searching for the truth that is trying to come through us through the medium of these particular words, in this particular moment, a truth that we can discover in no other way than through our attention to the writing task itself. If we can attend to this task, the truth will make itself known. Then our job becomes how to shape the text so that its truth is visible.

GC: What are some of the problems that writers new to creative nonfiction seem to commonly make? How do you get them to work through them?

RM: Many new writers come to creative nonfiction through memoir, the impulse to tell their own stories. And certainly memoir is a time-honored tradition in nonfiction. But it is not the only tradition. Literary/creative nonfiction is a large, elastic form that can accommodate many sizes and shapes, so I encourage students (and myself, as well) to try out forms besides the memoir: travel essays, profiles, lyric essays, dialogues, meditations, cross-genre experiments. Memoir, to my mind, is absolutely the most difficult genre. Of course, all genres

are difficult, a fact I've learned through working in poetry, short fiction, novel, and essay. But no other form requires a total destruction of subject matter (one's life) as the first step in the formation of a text (the memoir). One has to learn how to see one's life as a text, and that is a difficult step. A difficult series of steps. Lately I've been thinking a lot about the complicated route between memory and memoir (that's memoir, not ME-more), and what I've come up with so far is a four-part model that seems to suggest the route that I usually follow: MEMORY (what life gives us, the raw material); DISMEMBER (breaking the memory apart, sometimes even violently, in a search for meaning or context); RE-MEMBER (as in, putting the broken pieces back in a new form), and, finally, if we're lucky, MEMOIR.

GC: Lastly, as an established, published author, do you have a writing "formula" each new idea?

RM: Is there a formula, Gretchen? Where can I purchase it? Believe me, I would rush out today and buy a lifetime supply if I thought it would help me with the essay revision in which I am currently mired. I'm kidding, of course. The difficulties and challenges are what make the writing process interesting. I mean, if we can't keep ourselves challenged, the reader will not be challenged either. Some days I wish there were an easier way to find my way through the work, but then I remind myself that I didn't become a writer for the ease or convenience of the task--and certainly not for the money!--but for those rare, dazzling moments of joy when the words click into place.