

1. How do you balance truth with storytelling in creative nonfiction, especially when memory or perspective may distort events?

Every essay begins with a premise, not a memory. Sure, an unwanted emotion (a stowaway envy or a repressed event from childhood that demands immediate attention) often bobs to the surface and represents a trapdoor into the past. But the emotion, the image, the entire recollection doesn't warrant an essay until I can hammer its urgent suggestiveness into a strong premise that then acts as the narrative node from which the story, the insight, and the reckoning branches into.

Any other way makes the entire enterprise needlessly nebulous. Since memories are endless, to wring out truth from the past, I borrow a small principle from photography and frame by exclusion, rather than inclusion. I graft a fraction of the past, excluding everything else to achieve truth by omission, which I then churn into a premise: *it's easier to be brave than courageous; grief is endless; depression is a life-long neighbour; or: art will save you.*

History and memory are full of omissions. Thus, the essay form demands a mastery of negative space, of silence as much as speech, of things remembered and others rightfully, and artfully *forgotten*, i.e., excluded. Once I've successfully worked out the premise from the memory, once I've achieved truth by omission, I extract the silk from the worm: I explore the premise in relation to my past through storytelling, working the narrative through events from my life, historical parallels, other essays, poems, and sometimes conducting a philosophical analysis, a moral vivisection of the reanimated reminiscence.

Even though perspective presupposes bias, a tendency towards chauvinism, a good essayist treats their idea, the binding logic in their premise, like a punching bag, testing its various weakness so the critic's assaults will land like a stick to a piñata, unveiling the sweetness beneath the rigor. However, we, both readers and writers of essays, must keep in mind also that memory is rarely ever a remembrance of the past but rather a remembrance of a remembrance, or worse, a recollection of the things we think we remember. One must respect this in-built fallibility and dust their authority on the chipped threshold before entering the sacred temple of essays.

And, apart from cases where defamation might come into play, we must not treat essays, or creative nonfiction, as a form that loses its forte when it abandons 'truth'. What is *true* about a person, an event, or a period is not always the truth—i.e. what's factual. There are assembled truths, imagined truths. And that is what all stories often aspire towards, the expansion of reality, and not merely a factual description or one-to-one recreation. It goes without saying: *realism is the most boring way to depict reality.*

I am speaking broadly here about creative nonfiction, and am in no way asking writers to deceive: passing an augmented personal narrative as fact. Ultimately, the essayist must have the

fastidiousness of a journalist towards facts and the freewheeling, minutiae-to-epic imaginative stroke of a master novelist.

2. How do you handle writing about people from your life who might see themselves in your work? Do you prioritize their feelings, or the integrity of your narrative?

It's not an either/or situation, rather both. In an anecdote, a person is often reduced to a persona, and in a positive story, this can be okay, but in a negative one, it can be detrimental. In a memoir or narrative that doubles as a critique of one's self and the people involved, it is easy to turn these featured people into caricatures, just so the argument lands well.

So, I often use an initial or a moniker, or describe people from my life in a way that's not easily recognizable, even to them. Except in the case of abuse, name-dropping can be intrusive, thus I always consult or, at the very least, inform them beforehand. For, just in the same way a photograph punishes growth, or resists change, a portrait of a close person can turn into a cage, a cage of words, which can be difficult to undo, because unlike dictionaries and textbooks, we don't like to abridge the stories we believe to be true of other people. We punish people by treating their past as gospel and their present as hearsay.

3. Do you have any specific rituals or habits that help you stay productive as a writer?

I have several. I, for one, collect sentences. When I stumble across a sentence or bouquet of prose I admire, I stow it away in a notebook, archive it in a document, and recite it over and over until it clings to my memory. I like to believe it primes my brain into thinking a certain way, informing it of what I'm trying to achieve each time I officiate between words.

Apart from that, I go on long, aimless walks. Something about being a flaneur gets my brain turning. Some of my best thoughts come when I'm far from home, surrounded by reeds and butterflies, the air cool enough to freeze my lungs. There's something about open air and the hard ground beneath your feet that opens the mind to boundless speculation.

4. How do you know when a piece is finished, especially in nonfiction where the story could keep evolving?

Once I've exhausted my arguments and made all the right points, when I've expressed myself to the hilt, or when there's no blood left to drain from the heart of contention, I put the final full stop and call it quits.

On a more technical level, I plot everything I write: books and buildings begin with blueprints. I select the memories that correlate with the theme, do research on the other aspects—a famous

writer's anecdote, an obscure, fun fact about a historic event etc.—and map them out with an outline, before I lay the sentences one after the other.

I also estimate a word count for each work, a habit I suspect comes from my formative years as a content writer where I had to churn out articles to exact word counts. To do so, I broke down the sections into even more constricting word counts—50, 100, 250—before writing. While I'm not this exact when it comes to essays, I find that plotting out the landscape, taking reconnaissance, so to speak, of the idea helps me be necessarily contraceptive, so the writing stays sharp and features all the remarkable landmarks, all the mountains and volcanoes, the flowers and the dead body from which they sprout.

5. How do you deal with writer's block or creative fatigue? Are there strategies you use to reignite inspiration?

Reading works magic. I find writer's block to be a problem of articulation, often in relation to the quality of the prose. When that's the case, I read my favorite authors. But I'm really the worst person to ask this, because I rarely get writer's block. Maybe how I set up shop is to blame.

I allow stories to ferment for years before I write them. Anytime I'm working on a novel or an essay, chances are I've been talking to friends about it—testing the premise and the power of certain scenes—for at least a year or two. Once I'm convinced about the idea, I can take anywhere between a year or six to research it before the prose work begins. I plot religiously, too. As stated earlier, I plot the entire essay and the sections in-between.

It works for me, and I don't complain. Plus, I tackle the difficult parts first (opening sentence and final scene) months before I flesh out the body. Even at that, I don't write chronologically, a freedom I suspect comes from first figuring out the end and the entire structure. Once that's done, I can enter any scene like a room, furnish it then leave. That's the freedom that comes with installing the foundation, the main plot points, months or years in advance: I can explore without getting lost, and that freedom also doesn't hamper my overall ability to articulate myself. The words just come, and one can't get missing in one's own house.

6. When writing essays, how do you decide when to take a reflective versus a narrative approach? Is there a guiding principle that helps you structure your work?

I often realize the essay's form through prolonged introspection. But not always. As a rule, if the story works as gossip, then I follow the narrative path; if it works best as a sermon, then I become more reflective. If it has fantastic, incredulous elements, then I stick to narration; but if it's an essay that burrows into a symptomatic element of pop culture or a political phenomenon, then I stick with the reflective approach.

Sometimes, I allow the pendulum swing to and fro by doing the Baldwin-cum-Gladwell stuff and alternate between the personal and the global, working out the myriad transitions at the point where personal memory overlaps neatly over collective history, where the individual's needs collide violently against what society wants.

7. Who are your biggest influences in the essay genre, and what have you learned from their work?

Eve Babitz and Elisa Gabbert. I know this should be a list populated by Baldwin, Emerson, Borges, Achebe, Theoreau, Teju Cole and Joan Didion and Susan Sontag. I've read them. I love them. Their works, their words, remain timeless touchstones: dizzying, disorienting peepholes into what is possible within the form, how it can tackle history, philosophical ideas, culture, politics and the personal within a paragraph or the breath of an entire essay. All this is true. But just as I came to fantasy by way of F. Scott Fitzgerald, rather than say Sanderson, so also did I come to appreciate the essay through Eve Babitz and Elisa Gabbert, two revered and acclaimed writers who are still not as celebrated as they ought to be.

In [\*The Most Interesting Thing\*](#), a fragmentary essay I wrote earlier this year for *Restful Mag* about art that moved me, I described the lesson I took from Eve Babitz as: "...the exploration of one's city as an art of introspection into one's self."

Since I am obsessed with cities (and the writers they birth: Dublin: Joyce; Anambra: Achebe; California: Didion), discovering and reading Babitz gave me license to explore Calabar, my home city, in a way I thought ludicrous when I began writing. The way she explored Los Angeles with the care of a Smithsonian intern at the Colosseum taught me to see my city as my ultimate site of artistic excavation, as my window into my country, my tribesmen, and the world at large.

Baldwin's treatment of Harlem during the 1950s has, more or less, immortalized the place, and Stephen King also represents this same city-creed, but I came into literature through the backdoor. My erudition has been shaped, so far, by an unorthodox, self-made curriculum. I read, and continue to read, out of order, making haphazard leaps; hence, I learnt this timeless lesson from a lesser-known oracle, that a city can become a writer's ouija board with which they interrogate and unveil their insidious, psychological tendencies, a place from which they can make the occasional timeless, prophetic proclamations about the human condition.

As for Elisa Gabbert, what I find fascinating about her work is the same thing readers and lovers of Teju Cole find fascinating about his work—the sheer, erratic scope.

8. How important is reading widely in the development of one's own writing style, and are there specific types of texts you believe every essay writer should study?

A writer should read as wide as an editor and as deeply as a critic if they want to develop any style. But that's not all: they must master the fundamentals of good prose: punctuation, grammar, rhythm, and meaning. In chess, no one can become a super grandmaster with their own unique play style—as dangerously intuitive as Fisher or sacrificially aggressive as Tal—without first studying both the fundamentals and the greats. You must know your opening theory, the middle game and end game. You must know the value of moving the rooks to the seventh rank and so on. As with chess, so it is with essays. Read the classics: Montaigne, Emerson, Baldwin, Didion, etc. And the contemporary. Read cookbooks and study arcane history. Know as much as you can, so you can meet the moral, philosophical, and narrative demands of each differing essay.

9. What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received, and how did it influence your work?

“A writer is a professional observer.” Coming across this quote from Susan Sontag put a lot of things in perspective for me. Writing is the last phase of what a writer does. Before that, there's the accumulation of memories and emotions, the facts of the world and the implication of history on the present or the future. Then comes observation. And with observation comes introspection, correlation, pattern recognition. These acts combined sometimes trigger interrogation. Imperatives driven like shovels into blood-filled dirt. All of these conspire towards an insight, a eureka moment that finally warrants the putting together of words, the hunched posture in front of a glowing laptop.

But in all this, observation, observation is what gives prose its fragrance, its license to truth. Details are lost in passive observation. The writer's job is to look at the nib of a pen and think of its similarity to the roll-on, and read, later, that the woman who invented the roll-on was inspired by the ball-point pen, which had been invented a few years prior. Everything I've written so far that's resonated has come from careful observation. Indeed, every book worth reading contains the fossils of crucial observations.

10. There's a growing trend of writers exposing their deepest vulnerabilities in personal essays, but some argue this oversharing is exploitative or even counterproductive. Do you think there's a danger of commodifying personal pain for clicks or validation?

According to this verdict, the only thing worse than a confessional poet is a confessional essayist. But there's nothing new about turning the pockets of one's heart inside out, inviting more witnesses. I have no reservations on this, truly: as long as the writer doesn't abandon a

thorough aesthetic, and esthetic, treatment of their pain, then they can be as confessional as a war criminal to a priest in a coma.

The only danger I can see is when they only aim to shock alone, or if they veer too much into the mawkish, into loud, unbridled sentimentality. Other than that, every essayist is confessional—it's only a matter of degree. Even an essay about a volcanic rock is a statement about one's self. A writer cannot hide behind words: for words are too transparent, too thin a mesh to conceal one's heart behind. And woe unto the vulgar writer; their shameless fame shall be their undoing.