



# **You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between**

*Lee Gutkind*

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From "the godfather behind creative nonfiction" (*Vanity Fair*) comes this indispensable how-to for nonfiction writers of all levels and genres, "reminiscent of Stephen King's fiction handbook *On Writing*" (*Kirkus*). Whether you're writing a rags-to-riches tell-all memoir or literary journalism, telling true stories well is hard work. In *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, Lee Gutkind, the go-to expert for all things creative nonfiction, offers his unvarnished wisdom to help you craft the best writing possible. Frank, to-the-point, and always entertaining, Gutkind describes and illustrates every aspect of the genre. Invaluable tools and exercises illuminate key steps, from defining a concept and establishing a writing process to the final product. Offering new ways of understanding the genre, this practical guidebook will help you thoroughly expand and stylize your work.

## **You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between Details**

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# **From Reader Review You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between for online ebook**

## **Jan Priddy says**

This a how-to book by the “godfather of nonfiction.” Illuminated by long excerpts from strong creative nonfiction, Gutkind’s book manages to do what it claims to do: explain what creative nonfiction is and how to write it well. Gutkind promotes the narrative as the anchoring and most critical strength of creative nonfiction. Write scenes, he insists and the shows how this is done. It helps to discover that what Gutkind wants in an essay is precisely what a fiction-writer wants in a story. And it helps that I was familiar with several of his examples. It helped me a lot that I’d already written my “million words” of fiction, and that what he said made sense, that his examples are clear, and that this is the best book on writing nonfiction I have come across. That might be because it’s the first how-to by Gutkind that I have read. In any event, I highly recommend it and place it beside other favorites such as Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction*.

I'm not saying the book is perfect and I don't know that his examples would be my choices. He seems to be trying to play fair with his models, balancing male and female writers and not quite managing it. But trying.

He contrasts a former wife's fictional description of their marriage to his own as a way to acknowledge that truth is not the same as fact, that there is always opinion involved. And I've just published an essay on that very issue in VoiceCatcher. <http://www.voicecatcher.org/2012/09/1...>

I think Gutkind would be a pain in the ass to live with, but great fun to have over to the house for dinner and long conversation. And I would love to have the man over for dinner. I'm both a good cook and a good listener.

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## **Yaaresse says**

DNF - Our library closes for extensive renovations this week, and so any checked-out print books will have to be returned to a distant branch after Friday. I got to page 155, and my overall impression is "meh." I'm not interested enough in this book to either speed-read it or hunt down another format.

My purpose in reading it was to better understand why "creative non-fiction" has become A Thing and why its proponents seem to think the good old general term "non-fiction" is no longer good enough for them. One hint that this wasn't going to happen is when the author listed several examples of what he considers "great" creative non-fiction, and I recognized half of the books as ones I loathed specifically because the author made the book more about themselves than the subject they claimed to be covering. Given that, it should not have surprised me that this book also is crammed full of first-person preening and *I, me, my* language. (And what's the deal with going on and on about the ex-wife in the beginning chapters? Of all the examples that could be used, that felt slightly passive-aggressive and a little skeezy.) If I had wanted to read about him, I would have just gone to his website.

On the plus side, he's very clear about the rule "Don't make up stuff and don't present your opinion as fact." I can think of some news outlets -- as in most of them -- that should have that tattooed on the palms of all their

writers' and anchors' hands so they are constantly reminded of it.

(Since I got 40% through this and skimmed another 10% of it, I'm counting it as read.)

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### **Marsha Altman says**

I enjoyed the opening, when he talks about the development of creative non-fiction journalism, and the end, when he gives a history of scandals, much more than the middle of the book, which is mostly writing advice that I find very obvious.

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### **Karen says**

I enjoyed the book for the most part. I just have a personal bugaboo about authors referencing their own work too heavily. For me, it sounds pretentious and self-agrandizing. I admire Mr. Gutkind and his work, particularly with Creative Nonfiction Magazine. I would have enjoyed more writing samples from other authors (which does happen more frequently in the second part of the book), and less casual references to himself.

There were a few scenes that I thought read very differently than the conclusions he drew from them, but I'm a woman, and I get the impression that Mr. Gutkind is not quite tuned in to that demographic.

Some of the text was repetitive or seemed obvious to a person who has studied much writing at all, but too advanced for a person who knows nothing about structure.

It has its good points, but was not as satisfying as simply reading lots and lots of creative nonfiction pieces. Of course, it won't prevent me one bit from reading CN Magazine, In Fact, and the author's other great reads.

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### **Olga Godim says**

This is a textbook on writing non-fiction, and as such it shouldn't be able to compete with fiction. But for me, it did. Not only it competed but it also won the competition. Go figure!

I borrowed three books from the library at the same time: a selection of literary short stories, a fantasy novel by a well-known writer, and this book. I started with the short stories and couldn't proceed past the story #2; it was just too dull and barren of action. Next I opened the fantasy novel. It was OK [I wince]; I might even return to it some day, but the narrative was kind-off awkward and somewhat flowery, and the characters didn't pull me in either. And the story started in the familiar, slightly disappointing way: a princess has gone missing. So I put the novel aside and opened this textbook, hoping to learn something. And I only closed it three days later, when I reached the last page.

Although I expected this book to be a tad boring, it wasn't. It was fascinating, written in a clear, precise language, with a bunch of examples to demonstrate the author's point of view and his deep knowledge of the subject: creative non-fiction. The lessons I learned could be summarized in two points.

1. When writing non-fiction, **don't make stuff up, never, ever!** It should be obvious; it's non-fiction after all, but Gutkind delivers several real-life cautionary tales about non-fiction writers who did make stuff up, for various reasons. He also writes about their destroyed reputations and soiled credibility. Be on guard against fabricated 'facts,' he warns his readers.
2. To write interesting, solid non-fiction stories, writers can and should employ every trick known to fiction writers: structure, dialog, characters, scenes, and vivid descriptions. Without all of those, non-fiction falls

flat.

Gutkind also offers his readers multiple exercises and provides full texts of several best examples of non-fiction, written by the masters of the genre. And he analyses those stories with a sharp eye of a teacher. A very useful book, especially for those who aspire, like me, to write non-fiction. Maybe. Sometimes. There is only one bone I would pick with the author. I'm working on an essay about my mother, and according to Gutkind's lessons, my story is really, I mean truly, bad. And what's more, nobody would want to read it. On one hand, the realization upset me, understandably. On the other hand, perhaps I should toil on my narrative some more, find a deeper theme that would incorporate my small personal tale. If I make my essay more compliant with the ideas Gutkind highlights in his book, apply all his lessons diligently, maybe my little memoir will become better. I hope so.

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## **Tiina Mahlamäki says**

Luovan tai narratiivisen tietokirjan lyhyt ja tiivis määritelmä: hyvin kirjoitettu tosi tarina. Sellaisten kirjoittamisesta kertoo tämä teos, luovan tietokirjoittamisen kummisedäksi kutsutun Lee Gutkindin kirjoittama.

Teos on siinä mielessä onnistunut, hyvä ja vaikuttava, että jo ennen kuin olin päässyt kirjan puoliväliin, olin ideoinut kaksi tietokirjaa, jotka kummatkin voisin aivan realistisesti kirjoittaa ja joita ryhdyin jo hahmottelemaan. Kirja antoi siis hyviä ideoita, nyrkkisääntöjä harjoituksia. Mutta siinä oli hyvin paljon yhdysvaltalaiselle lukijalle tai kirjoittajalle tarkoitettuja ohjeita, vahva painotus siinä, että tarkoitus on saada paljon lukijoita. Siinä myös viitattiin esimerkkiteksteihin, joista yksikään ei ollut minulle ennestään tuttu ja kuvattiin hyvin paljon ja yksityiskohtaisesti oppaan kirjoittajan omaa elämää ja sen sattumuksia. Tämä taitaa olla jokin sääntö luovassa kirjoittamisessa, niinhän Julia Cameron ja Natalie Goldberg tekevät, mutta siihen alkaa kyllästyä ja odottaa, että päästäisiin asiaan.

Teoksen toisessa osassa käydään lävitse esseitä, joiden rakennetta lukijoiden oletetaan käyvän lävitse ja oppivan kohtausten ja dialogin käyttöä sekä tarinan rakennetta. Kirjoittaja toistaa toistamistaan nyrkkisääntöjään, joiden mukaan kohtaukset muodostavat rungon, jonka sisässä välitetään informaatiota lukijoille, joiden kiinnostusta tulee herkeämättä pitää yllä ja ruokkia. En ole aivan varma haluanko oppia kirjoittamaan juuri tällaisia tekstejä, mutta kirjan edetessä alan ymmärtää oppaan kirjoittajan pointit ja ehkä jotain opinkin. Ainakin nyt mieli palaa oman kirjoittamisen äärelle.

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## **Erika Dreifus says**

### **FIVE THINGS I LIKE ABOUT TWO BOOKS**

By Erika Dreifus

'Tis the season to focus on nonfiction. For me, anyway. As I struggle with essays of various stripes (and lengths), I'm infused with ideas and lessons gleaned from two new books: Lee Gutkind's *YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP: THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO WRITING CREATIVE NONFICTION FROM MEMOIR TO LITERARY JOURNALISM AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN* (Da Capo Press/Lifelong Books, Paperback, \$16.00 US) and *THE ROSE METAL PRESS FIELD GUIDE TO WRITING FLASH NONFICTION: ADVICE AND ESSENTIAL EXERCISES FROM RESPECTED WRITERS, EDITORS,*

and TEACHERS, edited by Dinty W. Moore (Rose Metal Press, Paperback, \$15.95).

Time pressures do not permit me to write full reviews of each book. But there is much to admire in them. I'd like to share with you five strengths that I believe apply to both texts.

### 1. EXPERTISE

Both Lee Gutkind and Dinty W. Moore are recognized experts in the subjects their books treat. Gutkind, whose titles include editor of the prominent quarterly CREATIVE NONFICTION, has been nicknamed the "godfather" behind the genre (the source of that reputation is explained in the book's early pages). For his part, Moore's name is similarly familiar in the world of brief nonfiction, exemplified by the work published in BREVITY, the online magazine that he edits. Contributors to the FIELD GUIDE TO WRITING FLASH NONFICTION include acclaimed writers and teachers: Bret Lott, Philip Graham, Lee Martin, and many others.

### 2. CONTEXT

Each book provides a sense of historical context. One of the most interesting sections of YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP is an appendix – credited to CREATIVE NONFICTION's managing editor Hattie Fletcher – which summarizes "Great (And Not So Great) Moments in Creative Nonfiction, 1993-2010." If you need a refresher timeline for les affaires Benjamin Wilkomirski, James Frey, and "Margaret B. Jones," you'll find it here. You'll also find reminders of how recent some of the best known books of creative nonfiction – not to mention journals, programs, and other institutional markers – truly are.

For its part, the FIELD GUIDE TO WRITING FLASH NONFICTION features a useful introduction (by Moore) that traces the evolution of "the myriad ways in which authors over the centuries have embraced the very short form of thoughtful, artful nonfiction." Moore is also careful to cite significant developments in our own times, including the growing popularity of brief \*fiction\* (manifested in several notable anthologies published in the 1980s and 1990s) and a series of "fine brief nonfiction anthologies," beginning with IN SHORT (1996), edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones.

### 3. SAMPLES

Both books provide not merely excerpts, but rather full-text examples of essays that illustrate key craft points. Gutkind's choices are interspersed throughout his book. In the FIELD GUIDE TO WRITING FLASH NONFICTION, each contributor focuses on a specific aspect of craft, whether it has to do with image and detail or voice or point of view, and presents an exemplary essay (sometimes the contributor's own, sometimes not). And the quality of these readings is simply outstanding.

### 4. EXERCISES

Each of Moore's contributors also includes a complementary prompt or exercise. That means there are about two dozen exercises in the book – enough to keep any of us going for quite some time. Although they're less numerous, exercises also appear sprinkled through Gutkind's book.

### 5. TEACHABILITY

Here I refer not (only) to the books' potential usefulness for the classroom, but also – and perhaps even more important – to their potential usefulness for the individual writer-learner. These are books that I know that I –

with an MFA in fiction and four online poetry courses behind me – will turn to again and again as I seek to improve my skills as a writer of creative nonfiction. There's no way I have possibly absorbed all that they have to teach me in the initial readings I've completed so far. But – thanks in large part to their aforementioned qualities - I am confident that I will return to both books. Often.

(These remarks first appeared in the October 2012 issue of THE PRACTICING WRITER. Complimentary copies of both books provided by the respective publishers.)

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### **Brandylien says**

I was actually taking notes from this book, which is saying a lot, because I've read so many books on writing (to keep the advice and "rules" fresh in my mind), and mostly I don't learn anything new really. But what Gutkind, the "Godfather of Creative Nonfiction," has put forth in this book are some really useful techniques and strategies to fine-tune your creative nonfiction piece. One in particular was to whip out the old highlighter. I haven't used one of those in a decade, but I happily trotted off to the dollar store and bought myself a pack. Gutkind suggests using one to highlight all the parts of your piece that are scenes (and he thoroughly describes what constitutes a scene, which I've found isn't as obvious as you think). Scenes are what keep the reader's attention. In creative nonfiction, however, it's much easier to rely on backstory to carry the narrative. The trick is to change the backstory into descriptive scene. (Thankfully, I've got lots of hot pink showing up in my 300-page manuscript thus far).

Gutkind also gives a history of creative nonfiction as a genre--how it came to be, how it's been vilified thanks to writers who take liberties with the creative part of the craft and make up "truths," how it's become one of the most marketable genres today.

I highly recommend this for anybody who's looking to learn about the craft or who needs some new insight into it.

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### **Melinda says**

Gutkind provides excellent examples to illustrate his advice, all while modeling how to approach our own work with framework and focus in mind. As he recommends, I plan to read the book again after a short break. It would be impossible to internalize everything from the first pass.

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### **Billie Pritchett says**

Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* is a pretty good little book that gives sound advice on writing nonfiction. It has a lot of writing exercises in it to encourage readers to begin to hone one's craft. To be honest with you, I didn't do the exercises, just read the book. But I think if I were to go back and do the exercises and reread the notes I took on the book, then I will be able to improve my writing. Couple things I will say right away. Gutkind's advice is best when it's about how to frame a story and also about the importance of revision. He really really emphasizes revision and says that it's best to just get all the material out there on the page, don't take too seriously what you write on that first draft, and then go back and hone,

hone, hone. Will take it to heart.

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## **Niko Hyppönen says**

Hyviä vinkkejä asiatekstien kirjoittajille.

Tässä vielä tiivistetysti mielestäni parhaat kirjan vinkit:

- Jos haluat kertoa ihmisistä, vietä heidän kanssaan aikaa. Luottamuksen saaminen vie pitkään.
  - Tee taustatyösi huolella. Faktoilla on väliä tekstin uskottavuuden kannalta.
  - Kun haastattelet, kysele paljon (esim. mitä ajattelit silloin, miltä siellä näytti jne.). Näin sinulla on enemmän materiaalia, jolla kuvata tapahtumat.
  - Tarina kiinnostaa ihmisiä. Kerro tapahtumista ja pistä faktoja mukaan sopivissa paloissa.
  - Luo jännitystä varsinkin tekstin alkuun. Esimerkiksi jos kertoisit kirurgeista, tekstin voisi aloittaa kertomalla leikkauspöydän tapahtumista ja jättää loppuratkaisun auki.
  - Vaikka kertoisit paikallisesta asiasta, yritä yhdistää se osaksi isompaa ilmiötä, joka kiinnostaa suurta joukkoa.
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## **Feisty Harriet says**

Have you ever had an experience where you finally realize that there is a name for the thing you love? I love nonfiction, I love textbooky history books and dense work on neuroscience, but I also REALLY love true stories about real people and events and places, and there are writers who have the uncanny ability to make those stories come ALIVE in ways no textbook can. I gravitate towards those authors and their work and annoy everyone I meet with recounting the awesomeness of the latest book I'm reading.

That thing? It's called Creative Nonfiction. And I had no idea and now it's all I want to read and learn to write. This book is a how-to for writing creative nonfiction and I think I took notes on every other page. Gutkind excerpts and refers to many books that I LOVE and I had no idea that they were all in the same subcategory of nonfiction, the type that draws you in and keeps you there: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *Seabiscuit*, *Angela's Ashes*. Dah, I feel like I have so much more to learn on how to write, and that is a fantastic, giddy feeling.

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## **Maria says**

Easy-to-read, clear book on writing literary essays and imaginative nonfiction. The author peers into the bones under bestsellers such as Rebecca Skloot's "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," Susan Orlean's "The Orchid Thief" and the work Dave Eggers. His goal is to move writers from dry facts and excessive restraint, into a more imaginative treatment of true-life writing.

Gutkind follows his own rules by including anecdotes and interesting stories from forty years as a professor and writing instructor, and as one of the early proponents of literary/creative nonfiction.

If you write newspaper columns, short-form nonfiction or essays--or if you blog or write for business--



Gutkind's book will help clarify what makes real stories fascinating. He covers subjects such as creating a cohesive framework, how to mix stories and reflection, and what are the ethics of dialogue and fact-checking in non-fiction writing.

The inclusion of writing from more than a dozen gorgeous examples (a rural veterinarian, a hospice worker's yellow taxi, a visit to a psychiatric ward, Frank Sinatra suffering from a cold) show how non-fiction can be emotionally-resonant, powerful and factual.

This genre (which includes memoirs, narratives, historical biographies and all manner of real-life storytelling) is a dominant segment in the bookselling world. Creative nonfiction titles have topped best seller lists with regularity, and demand for well-written accounts of real people (e.g., *Unbroken*, *Into Thin Air*, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*) has stayed strong. Readers have an insatiable fascination with true re-tellings of life, in all its amazing, tragic, mundane and quirky glory.

The clear, precise writing of Gutkind's handbook is dotted with brilliant excerpts from past and recent non-fiction pieces. This mix of instruction and example keeps it interesting. You could easily read it in one or two sittings. It has the tone of *Time* magazine mixed with a witty *New Yorker* article...lots of obscure illustrations and interesting facts, in a conversational, easy-to-digest format.

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### **Sandee Ferman says**

I found it hard to read, and at the same time easy to read.

Difficult, because even though it's liberally sprinkled with engaging essays, there's enough "I told you so" in there to take away one star in the rating. Some pedantry gets in the way, but not much until the last chapter when Gutkind goes on for pages about getting an MFA in creative nonfiction. An MFA. Seriously? I didn't think the book was geared toward academic degree wannabes (and it isn't). That chapter could have been eliminated without missing anything.

Easy -- and fun -- to read because of the copious examples of very good creative nonfiction that were included and then analyzed to point out their methods. I enjoyed reading "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" (an excerpt) and was riveted by the story. It was a good example of how compelling nonfiction can be when it's written using the basic techniques used in fiction: storyline, tension, scenery, etc. Gutkind chose some essays I wouldn't have, but he also chose some memorable gems for this book.

If you have any inclination to write any kind of nonfiction, this is absolutely a book you'll want to read, preferably early in the process!

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### **Jessica says**

Brilliant book on how to write creative nonfiction, complete with examples from some of the finest essays and memoirs I have ever read. I think the "exercises" could have been a little more action-oriented than they were, but they were just the sprinkles on a learn-by-example cake. Or whatever. A great book for anybody wanting to write creative genres.

