

A love letter to non-fiction

Roz Bellamy

I love writing down observations and tucking them away, usually never to be found again. I always believed my goal was to turn these little snippets of life into fiction. A hilarious line I had overheard could be adapted and spoken by a character. Strange outfits, feuding couples or teenagers gossiping on the train were all rich fodder for my stories. I never thought about letting my observations stand alone, not always having to be cloaked as fiction.

I completed a four-year writing degree at UTS and, by choice, barely touched nonfiction. Creative nonfiction with Mark Mordue was my favourite subject, yet it did not occur to me to write nonfiction for my Honours thesis. Ethnographic writing with Katrina Schlunke was another subject that surprised, delighted and challenged me. Yet I continued to enrol in narrative writing, genre writing and short fiction, pushing myself to write stories that didn't make me feel anything. During Honours, where I wrote a novella, I didn't pay attention to the fact that my best feedback, the strongest reactions, came when I submitted assignments that were nonfiction. I wrote about a variety of topics, including border issues between Mexico and the United States, and was often questioned if that was my research area, as the intensity of my writing suggested. When I wrote about real life, without characters and made up dialogue, the words flew out onto the page. It is so dynamic and powerful to write directly about an issue I care about. It felt like fiction obscured what I wanted to say, which should have been a sign to try something else.



After Honours in 2006, I stopped writing for years. I tried to write alongside full-time work but had writer's block, or as I now see it, I lacked passion and enthusiasm. It wasn't until I started reading nonfiction that my love of writing returned. I discovered Emily Rapp's blog, Little Seal, about her son Ronan's diagnosis with Tay-Sachs disease and his suffering as the disease progressed. I was stunned by the beauty, eloquence and bluntness with which she described her experience. Later, I travelled to New Mexico to study with Rapp. On the first day of her memoir workshop, when she addressed common misconceptions about memoir writing, including many I held myself, I felt such a sense of relief and belonging.

I was hesitant when it came to writing. Memoir writing, at its best, requires blunt honesty, throwing out words on subjects that shy, retiring writers usually repress as far down as they can. Writing my first few pieces of memoir brought terror alongside an incredible rush of joy. I had never felt so drawn to the page. Even writing about emotional, difficult times, brought me such a sense of release and freedom. This form of writing, whether you are doing it for

publication or just for yourself, is so rich, tender and revealing. You are bound to have insights and epiphanies about yourself. There are many other benefits, for personal revelations, relationships and implementing change (see [this blog in the New York Times](#) for more). It can also a powerful genre for social change, offering a voice to marginalised people.

Since then, I haven't looked back. I still dabble in fiction, and who knows – maybe one day my urge to write a novel will return, just as intensely as I felt it at age twenty. For now, though, I write essays, travel pieces and memoir. I am writing a book that combines research and memoir, and it is a joy to gather up my observations and write.

Roz Bellamy is a Melbourne-based writer who particularly enjoys writing about sexuality, gender, race and education. Her work in progress, *The Queerness of Marriage*, was shortlisted for the 2014 Scribe Nonfiction Prize for Young Writers. You can read more of her writing at www.rozbellamy.com.