

True Lives: Reading Tracy Kidder as Creative Non-Fiction

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I first read Tracy Kidder twenty years ago; since then each of his successive books, with one possible exception, seemed to mirror my own personal journey, from trying to understand the onslaught of a new technology [*The Soul of a New Machine* – 1982], and then of building a house [*House* – 1985], establishing a career in teaching [*Among Schoolchildren* – 1989], caring for my aged relatives [*Old Friends* – 1993], and now, creating my family's place in a small town [*Hometown* – 1999]. These common events are the normal steps in anyone's life journey, and these five books by Tracy Kidder have appeared at timely moments for me, personally, and have given to me a comforting clarity about these life rituals. And, as I am merely an 'everyman' of sorts, millions of his readers must feel the same kinship and gratitude I do when I read a Kidder novel.

Whoops, no...they are not novels. Tracy Kidder does not write novels. Rather, he writes true stories, but stories so enriched with insight, wisdom, and good, solid re-

search that he makes each story truly reflect the world in a grain of sand. Nor does he pander to the adage that 'truth is stranger than fiction.' Instead, for each book, he invests years of close examination to the simple processes of everyday lives, exploring the connections between and the causes of all things plain and small. For him, truth is enough and need not be strange to be compelling. In a 1994 essay for *Writer Magazine*, he said "I figure that if I call a piece of my own writing nonfiction it ought to be about real people, with their real names attached whenever possible, who say and do in print nothing that they didn't actually say and do." And further into the essay, after noting what some writers strain to do in the name of non-fiction, he concedes that something goes into his nonfiction beyond the taking and transcribing of notes:

I don't mean to imply that all a person has to do to write good nonfiction is to take accurate notes and reproduce them. The kind of nonfiction I like to read is at bottom storytelling, as gracefully accomplished as good fiction. I don't think any technique should be ruled out to achieve it well. For myself, I rule out only invention. But I don't think that honesty and artifice are contradictory. They work together in good writing of every sort. Artfulness and an author's justified belief in a story often combine to produce the most believable nonfiction. For his readers, his version of the truth offers a satisfying in-depth look at the complexities around us, but he honors the line between the real and the invented. His stories are more than believable; they are

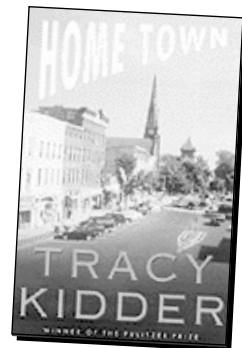
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instructive, enriching, enjoyable, and immensely worth the time. I regard them as a very creative, graceful retelling of the truth but with a kind of bonus attached. He seems to hypertext the story by embellishing not the facts themselves, but the facts before the facts. In *House*, he detours to tell the history of nails in what is ostensibly the tale of struggle between the artistic vision of an architect, the pragmatic values of the homeowner, and the working class virtues of the builders. *Old Friends* is such a tender story of two elderly men who share a room and their lives, which is particularly poignant because these two lives are ending. But in the midst of the poignancy, Kidder pauses to explain the politics and policies of nursing homes. In *Hometown*, he delves into the impact of transient populations on an old established village while keeping his focus on the interconnected lives of several key citizens.

In *Among Schoolchildren*, he explores the altruism of the teaching profession as a kind of magnification of the passion in his central character, a fifth grade teacher as frazzled and overextended as she is profoundly compassionate. His prose is truth creatively told; I wonder, though, if he would reject the term ‘creative nonfiction’ as a description of that prose. Creative nonfiction is an interestingly new sub genre in the long and noble tradition begun by the essayist Montaigne in the 16th century. There are those idealists among us who believe that something more wholesome and closer to God resides in the ‘truth’ of that which is not made up for entertainment – the genre called fiction. But modern theory has challenged the truthfulness of non-fiction, and maybe rightfully so. Today, many colleges offer courses in Creative Non-Fiction, and the artful style and metaphor making of the writer of nonfiction is analyzed, appreciated or critiqued, and then emulated. We have a journal devoted solely to creative nonfiction

called, not too artfully, Creative Nonfiction, founded by a a kind of self-appointed guru, Lee Gutkind, of the University of Pittsburgh. The National Endowment for the Humanities has blessed the genre with a definition, calling it “factual prose that is also literary – infused with the stylistic devices, tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of narrative poetry. It is fact-based writing... [that has] foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to truthfulness.” The definition is a bit vague, but still it satisfies our need to create sub genre from genre in order to create more fields of study for our graduate students.

I have been one such idealist, who chose non-fiction over fiction as a kind of ethical exercise, believing that I had no time for fanciful stories, that they were frivolous and I needed to be about the business of getting the facts about stuff, whatever the stuff was. And in graduate school, I took one of those Creative Nonfiction classes in which I took pleasure in arguing the line between fiction, creative non fiction, and honest-to-god objective, unbiased truth, that which we used to call, in the naiveté of our youth, journalism. It was in that course that I explored Kidder’s writings with a more critical, analytical eye. It seemed clear to me that by the criteria being used to define the genre of creative nonfiction, Kidder was a possible member. I grew frustrated with the ambiguity of the definitions we manipulated in order to justify our



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selections as great writers of creative nonfiction. I insisted that biography did not qualify, others offered poetry as examples of a stylized truth, and our professor moderated the debate with glee, defending some poetry and not others. My insistence that Robert Hayden's *Bone Flower Elegy* was creative nonfiction in the form of a poem met with fierce resistance and was finally rejected. We read Annie Dillard, Eudora Welty, Reynolds Price, Russell Baker, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Alfred Kazin, all gifted as fiction and nonfiction writers. We read memoirs, poems, essays, biographies, autobiographies, and a wonderful collection called "Inventing the Truth." Every author we read played with the truth, attempting to dress up the everyday with the ribbons and bows of metaphor, at times forcing symbolism for the sake of literary impact rather than honesty. And I preferred honesty.

So I brought Kidder's prose to class, a kind of grown-up show and tell, and defended him as a writer of creative nonfiction. I tried to show that he respected the line between literature for the sake of emotional impact and true stories told well. I pleaded the cause of objectivity, and explained that Kidder knew what every observer knew, be he reporter, explorer, or scientist – that the observer risks altering that which he observes. That is why Kidder's modus operandi was to quietly observe a microcosm over an extended period of time, years in fact, and to honor the subject with good old-fashioned research into the



nature and history of things. To me, Kidder was an excellent journalist first, paying his debt to facts before dressing those facts with literary force. He respects the story deeply and understands that the story carries its own magic. Thus his job, or his art as a writer, was in finding the magic and then managing the language artfully to convey the magic of the story to us. Through this, he serves a need greater than fiction, if I might be so biased to say, and does it through the genre of creative nonfiction, which is to enlighten us to complexity and depth, through an eloquent clarity, and thereby give us all a firmer grip and deeper appreciation of the magic reality all around us.

In fact, Kidder's Pulitzer Prize, which he won for *The Soul of a New Machine*, was awarded precisely for that ability to deliver a kind of decoded complexity that a layman could understand without diluting its significance. This book appeared in 1982, just as the personal computer revolution was about to take place in the American marketplace. Its timely appearance aside, the book's power took reader and critic by surprise. Nonfiction prose about technical issues rarely delivers the kind of drama that Kidder discovered at Data General and then developed into a compelling story. Kidder kind of slipped into the circle of personalities- hot-shot programmers and quirky engineers - that were designing a new machine, a computer faster, more powerful, and more unfathomably complex than anything known to man. A machine so promising and new yet radically beyond our ability to comprehend that Kidder, perhaps in his own awe, personified, perhaps even humanized the computer by investing it with a soul.

The strategy was brilliant, be it a writer's ruse of creative nonfiction, or a true sense of wonder over these new machines. In the early 1980's, many of us were half in awe and half in terror of this new breed of

technology. Just as 100 years before, with the advent of automobiles, or 60 years ago when telephones and televisions intruded upon our homes, we sensed that we would soon be faced with these new machines called computers; of course, they would help us, but our cultural cranks warned us that we would become enslaved to something we did not understand. And understanding a computer was going to take a lot more skill than understanding the automobile ever needed.

Even in those early years before personal computers, I was more aware of computer technology than many of my colleagues and neighbors. My husband was a bona fide computer geek. For years he spoke a jargon that I could barely understand, but to which I dutifully listened, and so I had a minimal understanding of terms like bytes, Basic, circuit design, chips, Fortran, flow chart, disk space, processing speed, and binary code. But the terms didn't gel and I could not, nor could most people I knew, explain how the computer worked. The *Soul of a New Machine* hit the shelves at an amazingly opportune time. Millions of us needed a teacher, a guide, someone to unlock the mystery and give us a sense of mastery over this new machine, and Kidder became our teacher, but our teacher in the best form a teacher can ever take, and that is as a masterful story teller. The prologue of the book, entitled "A Good Man in a Storm", begins on a sailboat, in a storm, and features an enigmatic character, the proverbially intriguing strong, silent type named West. How we get from there to the halls of Data General and into the very circuitry of a computer...well, that's the amazing tale, true but creatively told, of what might have seemed an unamazing event. The book holds interest throughout because the process of invention is laced through and through with the personality of the inventors and the conflicts within the corporation. But it is not just the hu-

man interest of greed and personality. Kidder does his homework, or perhaps I should concede that he does a lot of homework for his reader. In all of his stories, he investigates the history of a company or the source of a certain material needed for manufacture. Or he creates a vivid analogy to clarify a complex topic. A particularly clear explanation in *The Soul of a New Machine* was his analogy between program instructions to the machine and a mail delivery system. If computer instructions do not arrive to a certain 'mailbox' in the machine at just the right nanosecond, other incoming instructions will not function properly. To this day, 20 years after reading the book, I remember that analogy every time my personal computer locks up and refuses to function. I also understand my husband a lot better, and our computer conversations became more dynamic and two-way. I would not say that reading Kidder enhanced our relationship, but I did become a Kidder fan on the first book.

When Kidder's book *House* appeared, my husband and I had just finished building a house in upstate New York. We had worked with designer and builder alike, but remained steadfastly true to our vision of an energy-efficient passive solar home. Our battles, our dreams - both dashed and fulfilled - and the ever-escalating costs became an intense five-year odyssey. Our friends were 'buying' traditional houses in the suburbs, and while they listened sympathetically to our building woes, they could not understand. For anyone who travels a different road, the road is, of course and proverbially, lonely. The solace we found just in the articulation of a similar journey in *House* was emotionally and intellectually satisfying. We particularly enjoyed the voices of the Apple Builders, as their pragmatism and honest hard work, as well as their appreciation for a well-squared frame or the smell of fresh lumber, so sensually paralleled our own experiences. So

the truth of our life event was echoed artfully in the story of another couple's adventure in building a home, and now I felt indebted twice to the books of Tracy Kidder. That would have been enough.

When *Among Schoolchildren* was published in 1989, I had just graduated from college and begun to teach in a local high school. For this story, Tracy Kidder followed [observed? Got to know? Investigated? Watched? What would be the best word?] Chris Zajac for a year, while she taught, while she lived her personal life as wife and mother, and while she moved among her community. I began the book with some skepticism. I am not a fan of teacher books or movies; it is far too easy to miss the complexity of educating children, and too often these teacher stories become sappy and sentimental. But Kidder served his readers well, yet again, and I was so grateful that this observer took the time to delve into the social and emotional issues that complicate the process of education and the institutions called schools. He sat with Chris while she graded papers and held conferences with parents, all the while striving to understand why one child performed poorly despite ability, and how others performed well despite the social and emotional problems with which they struggled. Kidder's book is not going to change public policy nor function as a great expose on the shortcomings of public education. But he does offer the same gifts of comfort, enrichment, and pleasure that can be found in his other books. Once again, to my surprise, I found a satisfying story at a significant point in my own life journey.

What else could Kidder find to write about, I wondered. Four years later, and again at a most apt time, he published *Old Friends*, the story of nursing homes, of aging, of friendship, of memories, of funding policies and local politics, and of the last

journey we all make to the end of our days. This book is as well written, but the issues Kidder raised and the eloquence with which he raised them have earned him some of his highest critical praise and several national TV interviews. Some wondered when Kidder won the Pulitzer so early in his career, if he would, or could continue to produce outstanding work. He has, and *Old Friends* gives ample proof that his skill as creative storyteller continues to grow. And for me, again personally, the book was particularly apt because my own grandfather had passed the same year it was published. He had spent his last few years in a nursing home similar to Linda Manor, the home featured in the book. As before, the book gave to many, and to me, some comforting insight and even wisdom for the difficult journey of saying goodbye to our elders while trying to provide the best care we can afford.

Kidder has written several other books. One that I plan to read soon, called *Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest to Heal the World*, tells of the heroic efforts of one American doctor working in Haiti. One that I am reading now called *Hometown*, published in 1999, follows the same pattern he has used for most of his other books. He studied the small town of Northampton for a year or more, mostly through the eyes of the town police officer, and artfully, eloquently, tells the graceful story of the intermingling of many lives that make up one small American community. Again he honors complexity, again he honors the truth, and yet again, he has managed to elevate the truth into something even better – magic but real.

For more information on Tracy Kidder, there are numerous biographies online, and several radio interviews that can be accessed and listened to through streaming audio.

