

Fact versus fiction

The grey zone between fact and fiction

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Between fact and fiction lies a grey zone that I visit often in my non-fiction writing. No account of events contains the whole truth. Some accounts contain little of it. In 2006 James Frey admitted that his memoir about his life as a recovering alcoholic, *A Million Little Pieces*, had strayed a long way from the truth. His publisher re-categorised the book as a semi-fictional novel. It is selling well. Then there is the celebrated travel writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor. This year, two years after his death in 2011, his biographer Artemis Cooper revealed that much of Fermor's travel writing was fiction, that 'Paddy was making a novel of his life'. One reviewer defended Fermor by saying he was such a colourful, larger-than-life and fascinating character that, even if some of his stories were not true, they might just as well have been. Welcome to the zone.

While writing the biography of W. H. Murray, the mountaineer and author of 18 non-fiction books, I became aware that his works contained a certain amount of fiction. I recognised the occasions when Murray entered the grey zone because I go there myself. Others, mostly non-writers, who have studied his books, and made a similar discovery, tend to be a little shocked, or disappointed, or even slightly triumphant in having caught out a good man in a naughty deed.

I cannot agree with them. Murray, like myself, was doing no more than exercising the story-teller's craft. Like most writers I pick out what I see as the salient, memorable or most interesting facts and reject others as being irrelevant and trivial. I sometimes alter the order of events, placing a particular memorable episode either at the beginning or at the end in order to achieve an effective hook or a strong climax. In describing a kayaking trip in the Shetland Islands I concluded the account with a description of the rounding of Out Stack, the mostly northerly isle in the British Isles. Actually, we did this in the middle of the trip, but it seemed the right note on which to end. I also make use of the composite account. I am kayaking down Loch Long: a sea monster turns out to be a

reflected vapour trail; mist writhes through the surrounding forest; a porpoise keeps me company for a mile or two; I have a close encounter with a nuclear submarine; and I paddle home again in the dark with shore lights twinkling all around me. These things did happen, but over a period of two years and a dozen excursions, not all on the one day.

I use invented dialogue fairly often. I feel that comic licence is allowed, especially. We are kayaking in the sound between Iona and Mull in rough seas; 'Michael said, "We'd better keep close together here." Then a wave picked me up and dumped me on top of his deck. "I didn't mean that close!" In reality, Michael's response was a few ripe oaths, and the quoted words were spoken later, in the pub. I also find dialogue a reader-friendly way to impact information and, to this end, words are put into people's mouths. The travel writer Mark McCrum told me that unless he wrote down conversations at the time they occurred, it only took half an hour before his memory began to reshape the original words. Although he never actually made anything up, Mark said, the individual journeys were often a lot more tedious than the version presented on the page made them seem.

It is the nature of story-telling, particularly if the stories are repeated again and again, for them to evolve. Although the repetition might only be in the mind, the stories will, nonetheless, change, become more streamlined and develop a pattern that perhaps was not originally there. Writers will find ways to heighten tension and generally trade veracity for the needs of a good story.

A memoir, after all, is the creation of a mind remembering. Research has shown that memory is not so much a storehouse of fixed information as a selective, suggestible, blank-filling teller of evolving stories. Memory is a reconstructive process in which some details are deleted and others inserted. Moreover, perspectives change, memories of pain fade and those of joy remain. In writing my memories of a childhood in India (a work in progress) I recount how, when sleeping out on the lawn in the hot season, I woke to find a leopard standing a few feet away, staring at me. I stared back, filled with wonder rather than fear. Then the

leopard turned and disappeared into the forest beyond the garden.

I can't now honestly say whether this happened or not. Perhaps I dreamt it, or imagined it so intensely that it became real to me, or it happened to someone else and I took ownership of it. There are many levels of accuracy. There are memories I can verify. There are memories for which the evidence is irrecoverable. There are hazy memories, then conjecture, then informed imagination. How much my subconscious mind, memory and imagination have altered events I shall never know.

Over the years I have formulated three 'rules' that help me inhabit the grey zone with self-respect. First, elements of fiction are out of place if the accuracy of the piece is of prime importance – as, for example, in official reports, news items, biographies, guidebooks or whatever readers place their trust in and depend upon the author's absolute adherence to the truth.

Secondly, there should be no deliberate intention to mislead, only to improve a story, tidy it up, make it more entertaining or reach a wider, more universal truth than the awkward facts can convey. I discussed this with the ghost writer Andrew Crofts. He believes that 'it comes down to the art of story-telling. Every story, every life, every anecdote needs to be polished and refined in order to make it digestible and memorable.' Bruce Chatwin occasionally changed details and fictionalized people, places and events in his non-fiction books. His biographer argued that 'He tells not half truth, but a truth and a half.'

My final condition is that only a small proportion of the text contains departures from the real facts – otherwise it ceases to be non-fiction and becomes some category of writing such as fantasy, allegory, docu-drama, faction, infotainment or another hybrid of literature that inhabits the boundary between fact and fiction. In some cases, if fiction is masquerading as fact on a large scale, it could be regarded as fraud.

Ghost-writing haunts the grey zone in a different way. Here the fiction is that the words have come from somebody else. Ghosted writing is far more prevalent than some readers realise, particularly amongst politicians, celebrities, authority-figures of various kinds and people with uplifting stories to tell – especially victims or those who have overcome adversity. Both Andrew Crofts and Mark McCrum, who also ghost-writes, agreed that they try to write the sort of thing their subjects would write if they had the talent. 'Often they can tell a story, but become laboured and stilted if asked to write it down', Mark said.

Another ghost, Alan Wilkinson, made the point that sometimes a little imagination or invention stimulates the subject's memory and then they finally produce the material you want. 'It's when they see your version, in print, how you see what they told you, that you start to get the core detail from them.' Regarding the ghost-written police memoirs that he worked on, Alan told me that he felt the reticence of his subject gave him a licence to invent minor characters, introduce descriptions of the North Yorkshire countryside and put thoughts into his subject's head. 'But we still call it non-fiction because all the crimes, and every bit of the police work actually took place.' Ghosted fiction comes close to deception, however, when the creativity is provided almost entirely by the unacknowledged ghost.

Given our innate story-telling tendencies, fiction has always found its way into supposed fact. With the gap between illusion and reality ever narrowing in our modern world and with the grey zone increasingly becoming the natural milieu of the digital era, the rules of play on the fields of non-fiction are becoming less rigid, the issuing of licences more generous and the borders between fact and fiction less guarded. In the not too distant future pure non-fiction – if there ever was such a thing – may be an endangered genre.

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