

Australian creative non-fiction: Perspectives and opinions

Abstract

Figures confirm that Australians avidly read their 'creative non-fiction'. But most would be unable to name the genre – it is not as widely defined or discussed in Australia as it is in the USA and UK, where it is actively debated and anthologised.

This paper goes to the heart of the genre in Australia, investigating through narrative interview why there is not more of an Australian voice in this international debate. It examines the perspectives and views of twelve of the country's most widely read, awarded and respected creative non-fiction authors, drawing them into the discussion.

There appears a wide spread disinterest from those who write creative non-fiction in this country to label it as such. But a disinterest in categorisation does not discredit the validity of the writing – indeed, this disinterest lends itself to an idiosyncratic character, or one of many 'different national manifestations'ⁱ around the world.

The writings of creative non-fiction authors in Australia are an integral part of a social history, and as such must be studied and collated as our own 'cultural pathway'.ⁱⁱ The international debate is an important one to take part in, as a collective impetus grows to legitimise the genre as a collection of differing national cultural assets.

Sue Joseph

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Introduction:

In this article, I discuss research gathered through narrative interviews with some of the best known, awarded and most widely read Australian creative non-fiction authors. I am distinguishing between ongoing dialogue, debate and anthologising in the USA and UK, and the relative lack of creative non-fiction discussion and debate and anthologising in Australia.

The article is structured as follows. I begin by discussing briefly the on-going debate about the naming of the genre. Then, by reviewing concisely what actually *has* been discussed and written in Australia, I highlight the dearth of research into the genre, relative to the USA and UK.

Next, I explain the research project that will result in the manuscript *Australian Creative Non-Fiction Writers: Our Authors and Their Process*. I reproduce segments of the interviews conducted, attendant to the labelling of the genre, in an attempt to formulate an Australian perspective of the debate from the professional practitioners' points of view. To date, my research has uncovered a seemingly idiosyncratically Australian perspective on creative non-fiction which is not in keeping with Northern Hemisphere regard of the genre and one which marries perfectly with academic Norman Sims' call for 'different national manifestations' (Sims 2009, p. 9) of the genre. This position is drawn from asking the twelve selected authors to reflect on their own practice and views about the genre.

In the final section of the paper I discuss the conclusion I have drawn from my research to date and argue that indeed, while Australians avidly buy and read works of creative non-fiction, there is not a widely known or recognised canon of creative non-fiction by Australian authors. Our own 'cultural pathway' (Sims 2009, p.10) has resulted in multiple works and examples existing disparately but not as a well known canon, as in the Northern Hemisphere. Nor is there a well known or regarded community of Australian creative non-fiction writers.

Does it Matter?

At this point, I wish to highlight the issue by asking the question – does it really matter if the creative non-fiction genre is recognised, or a community of Australian writers identified as such? And do Australian practitioners really even care about a label? This is one of the pivotal questions my current research is investigating. We are talking about a branding, and a branding that all the research in the past forty years cannot even agree upon. That in itself is telling. Perhaps in Australia we have kept quiet, in the discursive

sense, while struggling to simply produce it, scattered throughout the vast array of book publications, films and television dramas, long form narrative magazine and newsprint.

American academic Norman Sims recognises that the discourse, although more forcefully American to date, must and will vary internationally. He says:

Examinations of literary journalism from several countries suggest they follow their own cultural pathways and do not merely imitate the American models...We need an international scholarship that recognizes there are different national manifestations (ibid).

I hope that this paper is the beginning of creating the Australian national manifestation.

There is a list of American writers from the mid-60s onwards who are universally identified as practitioners of this form of writing: Jimmy Breslin, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, Michael Herr, John Hersey, James Agee, Jonathon Harr, to name a few. Before them, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Lillian Ross, Jack London. The list goes on. Indeed, crossing the Atlantic British examples include Piers Paul Read, John Simpson, James Fenton, and Norman Lewis; decades earlier there is Charles Dickens and George Orwell. Kerrane and Yagoda claim that British stories 'may be less mannered or self-conscious than their American equivalents, but they are no less dramatic' (Kerrane et al 1997, p.19).

There are many labels attributed to the type of writing this paper considers, nearly all of the nomenclature emanating from the USA and the UK. Some of them include: literary journalism, documentary journalism, literary non-fiction, art journalism, non fiction novel, immersion journalism, factual fiction, non fiction reporting, long form narrative, narrative journalism, intimate journalism, New Journalism, the New New Journalism, literature of reality, and the art of fact, literature of fact. Again, the list goes on.

For the purposes of my research, I am retaining the all-encompassing creative non-fiction tag, incorporating into it the sub-genres of crime writing; memoir; profile; essay; literary journalism; historical non-fiction; journal writing; food writing; travel writing. I have included literary journalism as a sub-genre, although other theorists regard it as the all-encompassing title. But in Australia at least, that may be misleading, as some of the leading proponents of this type of long form narrative may well be literary but definitely do not regard themselves as journalists, nor what they do as

journalism. After interviewing all my subjects, a more appropriate or comfortable Australian branding of this type of writing may emerge.

John Hartsock believes the cause of the inability to reach consensus on identity can be traced back to the criticism emanating from the 1960s/'70s New Journalism movement (Hartsock 2000, p.5). Wolfe himself believes the form was 'ungracefully' (Wolfe 1973, Preface) tagged the New Journalism but it is this tag which Hartsock believes caused such a 'critical furor' because once critics ascertained there was nothing 'new' about the New Journalism, it became an easy target to discredit (Hartsock 2000, p.6).

Hartsock points to an academic split between English studies and journalism studies (ibid) in America as polarising the ensuing debate around the naming of the form but he himself comes down on the side of 'literary journalism as the most appropriate name' (Hartsock 2000, p.12). According to Hartsock there were two academic schools of thought – the English studies' perspective, upheld by the likes of Barbara Lounsberry and Chris Anderson; and the journalism perspective, expounded by the likes of Thomas B. Connery and Norman Sims (Hartsock 2000, p.6). He believes now the two may be merging with the advent of work academics such as Kerrane, Yagoda, Sims and Kramer, to name a few (ibid).

In the mid-'90s, Norman Sims writes of the further development of the form, also referring to it as 'literary journalism':

In the 1970s Tom Wolfe suggested that the New Journalism required scene-by-scene construction, saturation reporting, third-person point of view, and a detailing of the status of lives of the subjects. In 1984 the Literary Journalists broadened the set of characteristics to include immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation. Writers I have spoken with more recently have wanted to add to the list a personal involvement with their materials, and an artistic creativity not often associated with non fiction. An innovative genre that is still developing, literary journalism resists narrow definitions (Sims 1995, p.9).

Robert Boynton has identified this other group of American writers, the successors of the New Journalism of the 1960s onwards, calling them the New New Journalists. He lists them as: Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, Lawrence Weschler, Eric Schlosser, Richard Preston, Alex Kotlowitz, Jon Krakauer, William Langewiesche, Lawrence Wright, William Finnegan, Ted Conover, Jonathan Harr and Susan Orleans, to name a few. He argues these writers in particular have positioned themselves 'at the very centre of contemporary American literature' (Boynton 2005, p.xi). He writes:

The New New Journalists bring a distinct set of cultural and social concerns to their work. Neither frustrated novelists nor wayward newspaper reporters, they tend to be magazine and book writers who have benefited enormously from the legitimacy Wolfe's legacy has brought to literary non-fiction (ibid).

Boynton goes on to claim that the new generation of writers experiment more with the way they get the story, than the language used or how a story is written. He writes:

The days in which non-fiction writers test the limits of language and form have largely passed. The New Journalism was a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism's rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the centre of the story, channelling a character's thoughts, using non-standard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms (Boynton 2005, p.xii).

Barbara Lounsberry decided that there is no correct 'term for this discourse' but that should not preclude studying and critiquing it. She leans towards the terms literary or artistic non-fiction, positing it as an identifiable discourse 'recognisable in its solid central particulars, though blurring (as all genres do) at the edges' (Lounsberry 1990, p. xiii).

Lounsberry writes:

We come down finally to the odd declaration that in our time literary non-fiction is a form of writing with a distinguished history, untold possibilities, and a terrible name. Literary non-fiction is certainly *not fiction* – although some works read like novels. Artful non-fiction is more than fiction, offering the satisfying truths of fact and the 'universal truths' of art (Talese et al 1996, p.30).

Lounsberry cites four 'constitutive features' of this type of writing: documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to 'invented' from the writer's mind; exhaustive research; the scene; and fine writing, literary prose style (Lounsberry 1990, p.xiii).

In 1997, Lee Gutkind was tagged the 'Godfather of Creative Non-fiction' by *Vanity Fair* journalist James Wolcott. Ramona Koval spoke to Lee Gutkind when he was in Australia in 2009. Gutkind described the incident:

Well, it sounds like a wonderful thing to be but in fact I believe that the author, James Walcott, who wrote the article, was being very critical of creative non-fiction. He was kind of doing a four-page roast of the genre because he didn't believe that it was a legitimate way to write. But what happens is that when people talk about you,

even if they talk about you in a critical way, it kind of sticks, and so he was being critical and he was being unapproving but it kind of directed a lot of attention to the genre at the time, and to me.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gutkind makes the point that it is unfair to always be asked for a definition of creative non-fiction because no one ever asks a poet or a short story writer for definitions of what they do.^{iv}

He claims there are a number of ways to differentiate journalism from creative non-fiction. He says:

One thing is that journalism is very formulaic, and journalism often begins necessarily with the facts of the story, whereas creative non-fiction always focuses on the story. Creative non-fiction is narrative from first word to last word, and the challenge in creative non-fiction is to embed the facts, the facts that the journalists find in their reportage, embed the facts in the story and then be able to tell the story and continue to keep your readers compelled and interested and inform them at the same time. The challenge in fiction is to write a terrific story. The challenge in journalism is to communicate solid, objective information. The challenge in creative non-fiction is to do it both and to do it well.^v

There is no doubt this type of writing is an emerging, controversial and ever-developing field. Looking back over the history, it is clear its emergence has been in waves but it has always been there, in some form or other. Perhaps the 1960s onslaught was in response to the times – rock and roll, the Vietnam War, the peace movement, the Women's Movement, sexual liberation, drug use. Regular he said/she said type of reporting just did not seem to be able to do this culturally explosive time any type of justice.

Regardless of the emerging field, thirty five years later, Tom Wolfe's prediction of 'dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre' (Wolfe 1973, p.3) has not been realised – the novel is still well and truly not replaced – but creative non-fiction has grown into a broadly, if badly-defined and well debated, genre of its own in the USA and the UK, embedded within the professional practice of journalism. Although interestingly, it is taught more in creative writing courses than journalism courses throughout the academy, despite its hybrid make up.

There is no denying that some of the most successful pieces of writing toward the end of the Twentieth Century were exactly what Wolfe did predict: true life informed by fictional technique. These are the stories Hollywood then picks up and catapults even further into people's lives – the stories of ordinary people, made extraordinary by what happens to them or

how they conduct themselves or what they discover or where they are, at a particular point in time.

Non-fiction in Australia

Australians love their non-fiction reading. From 2002 to 2003, 24 million non-fiction books were sold in this country while only 10.6 million fiction books were sold – a difference of 13.4 million (Blair 2007, p.29). One year on and the gap had increased to 19.2 million (ibid). And of course, this does not mean that every piece of non-fiction read belongs to the type of creative non-fiction at the centre of this investigation. In 2004, of the top 150 books sold in Australia, 65 were non-fiction, and of these, 28 can be classed as creative non-fiction (Blair in Tanner 2009, p.346). In the latest figures released, 59 percent of the books (\$485.4million) sold in this country were non-fiction, compared to 25 percent (\$207.6 million) fiction.^{vi} These numbers clearly reflect audience desire to immerse themselves in evocative fact about the world they live in.

But in Australia, there is a dearth of research, debate, discussion and recorded history defining a recognisable creative non-fiction canon. Even a cursory literature review sheds light on the fact that as an analysed and archived genre, Australian creative non-fiction as such does not exist. There are no anthologies claiming the genre as a unit, significantly Australian, as exist in the USA and UK.

Throughout previous research into the ethics surrounding creative non-fiction writers^{vii}, I found it necessary to abandon my search for Australian analysis and draw on the extensive writings and anthologies published, mainly in the USA. Books by Thomas B. Connery, Chris Anderson, Barbara Lounsbury, Norman Sims, Mark Kramer, John Hartsock, Bill Roorbach, Gay Talese, Lee Gutkind, Kevin Kerrane, Ben Yagoda. The list goes on and on, a list with no Australian equivalent.

Apart from a handful of Australian journalists and academics, the discussion about what is creative non-fiction does not get off the ground in Australia, even though it is taught throughout the academy with a great demand from students.

David Conley and Stephen Lambie devoted a small section of one chapter of a text first published in 1997 to *New Journalism and feature writing* (Conley et al 2006, p.235).

Nearly a decade ago in Australia, Donna Lee Brien wrote hopefully that with the advent of the genre of creative non-fiction internationally, it would be taken up here:

Creative non-fiction is currently a highly visible literary and publishing phenomenon in the United States... Australians have been writing creative non-fiction in various guises for decades, but it has not been identified as such. The advent of the creative non-fiction label, however, means that there is now a meaningful way to group, discuss and publish writing as diverse as memoir, fictionalised biography, autobiography and other life writing, some literary/

New Journalism, the 'creative' essay, innovative self-aware critical fiction, and various forms of experimental and narrative/dramatised history writing (Brien 2000).

Brien writes of a 'meaningful way to group, discuss and publish' diverse Australian non-fiction writing. But in Australia, the discussion has not really happen. Or it has only happened amongst a small number of practitioner/academics in various universities, but it was never granted any sort of cultural gravitas.

Matthew Ricketson's text on feature writing devotes an entire chapter to this form of writing. The chapter *Looking Ahead...to Literary Journalism*, defines literary journalism as:

...news that stays news. It has its roots in journalism but draws on the techniques of fiction to tell true stories more fully. The defining elements are outlined of a kind of journalism that is growing in the United States and the United Kingdom and to a lesser degree in Australia (Ricketson 2004, p.228).

Journalist and academic Susie Eisenhuth, together with academic Willa McDonald published *The Writer's Reader* which is perhaps the first of its kind in Australia to begin to interrogate the creative non-fiction genre. But they also include some non-Australian authors. They claim to have undertaken the book 'to put the focus squarely on the importance of reading other writers' (Eisenhuth et al 2007, p.ix).

There was one radio interview in Australia on the ABC's *Media Report*, convened by Jackie May, on literary journalism. She brought together journalist and academic Matthew Ricketson; journalist and author Margaret Simons; and journalist and academic Mark Mordue. May opened the session by saying: 'Today we delve into a style of writing known as literary journalism, and as you'll hear the term itself is pretty controversial. It's a

style that marries fictional writing tools with cold hard facts to deliver a lot more than your average news story.^{viii}

In that interview, Mark Mordue flagged an Australian history of the form. He said:

Australia does have a tradition of literary journalism I've discovered over time, and you can date it right back to *The Bulletin* at the turn of the last century when you had people like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson writing for it. And you can see that kind of irreverent tone, that kind of larrikin voice in publications like *Oz* from the '60s when Richard Neville was at the helm. You know, there's been *The Nation Review*, all kinds of sporadic kinds of movements, but most of this is kind of buried history, it's forgotten, it's overlooked, it's piecemeal and it's invariably under-rated. I think the history has to be revealed, the room needs to be made for the next wave...I hope that people will be sort of kicking the door through and that we'll see some great books as well emerge, as they have in the last ten years, and I hope will continue to be published.^{ix}

In their latest text, Tanner et al set out one chapter at the end of the book, defining creative non-fiction:

...a term that sets one group of non-fiction books apart from the others...you can tell you are reading non-fiction when you hold a work of non-fiction that is almost indistinguishable from a novel – the only difference being that the non-fiction work is completely factual (Tanner et al 2009, p.346).

Tanner et al differentiate between creative non-fiction and feature writing by citing three elements: style; immersion; and length (Tanner et al 2009, p. x).

There are no doubt other mentions of long form writing in texts I am unaware of but the differential I am investigating is much larger than a chapter here and there. In Australia, newsprint publications where long form narrative could safely find a home disappeared in the '80s with the demise of *Australian Society* and *The Independent Monthly*, as well as *Nation Review* and *The National Times*. Today, *The Monthly* has emerging potential and does publish quality creative non fiction, mainly in the form of the essay; *The Australian's* Inside Story periodically carries long form narrative; *The Griffith Review* carries excellent long form non-fiction from time to time; and newspaper weekly magazines constantly carry substantial profiles. But in terms of anthologising and recognising who the practitioners are, Australia has no canon.

Australian universities teach creative non-fiction as a popular and well attended subject, mainly out of writing schools as opposed to journalism schools. The result is that there are hundreds of tertiary students around the country studying creative non-fiction and its practitioners, but most readers have not only not heard of the genre of creative non-fiction, they do not regard its Australian practitioners collectively. Even more interesting, some of the authors interviewed are not sure of the genre themselves.

Australian Creative Non-Fiction Writers: Our Authors and Their Process

My current research seeks to foster discussion amongst Australian practitioners, as a contribution to the international debate on the genre, by interviewing twelve contemporary Australian writers of creative non-fiction. It must be clarified here that the inclusion of writers is highly subjective – but not only are these the writers I enjoy and have identified within my own definition of the genre, they are also highly regarded within the Australian literary community, with awards and accolades from their peers. They are: profile writer and literary journalist David Leser; memoirist and columnist Kate Holden; literary journalist and author Margaret Simons; travel and food writers, Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrooke; literary journalist and author Paul McGeough; author Helen Garner; author, journalist and social commentator David Marr; author and academic John Dale; profile writer and author Greg Bearup; indigenous author Doris Pilkington Garimara; author and journalist Estelle Blackburn; and author Chloe Hooper.

Response to many of my questions were polemical. Many of the authors strongly queried why I would even ask about a defined grouping of writers. David Marr said:

I'm not the least interested in whether or not there is a 'defined group' of non-fiction writers in this country. Why should there be? How on earth do we define 'group'? I'm one of many who write book length non-fiction, some if it in narrative form. That's a genre that's been pursued from the beginning out here. We've been writing pamphlets, histories, biographies etc from the time soldiers and convicts stepped ashore. Some of it was fine. Much of it was – as always – trash. But 'creative non-fiction' isn't new.

I write to explain. I don't have a novelist's imagination. I'm stimulated to write about subjects I believe are widely misunderstood. My purpose is to clear up misconceptions.^x

Marr talked about the debate over what to call the genre. He said:

It's an old debate that flared up once again in the face of the New Journalism of Hunter S. Thompson and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. The debate was raging when I began writing for *The National Times* in the late 1970s. At heart, it's a debate between those who believe storytelling distorts the truth, and those who see narrative as a particularly effective way of conveying truth. But as always, questions of quality are more important than questions of genre. Either approach works when good. Neither when bad.

The possibilities of a genre are defined by its best exponents, not by its worst.^{xi}

David Leser queried in much the same way:

Why do I have to think about it? Why do we have to think about it? Not why do we have to think about our craft and have to tell our stories in the best way possible. But why do we have to think about falling in that category... it is the category of your making or someone else's making and now you want us to fall in around in this category. But I don't actually think about myself in that category. I just think of myself as a journalist and a story teller.

... there is something slightly self-conscious about the discussion. First and foremost I regard myself as a journalist and as a story teller. You know a reporter and a story teller and a feature writer. So when you go beyond that and start analyzing what it is you do... that is a fair enough exercise but I don't actually sit down and think of myself as that doing that, I just think of myself as how can I tell the story the best way possible. How can I balance all of the considerations that need to be balanced? I don't have this conscious, you know... I am this or I am that when I sit down to write a story. That is not how it works for me. It is just that I think that I have a calling for it. I have a passion for it and for want of better labels I can go with creative non-fiction but it is not something that I have thought about.

I do know what you are saying but I guess for me our great, great, great grandchildren may be one day be able to say 'Yes we come from an Australian intellectual tradition'. Why don't we have that intellectual sort of tradition discourse here? Because we are a very young country, and Germany and all of those other countries aren't but it doesn't make us unintellectual. You are all out there doing it. If it takes a couple of academics to put a couple an anthologies together to say this is our literary tradition of creative nonfiction,

that can't be a bad thing. As an Aussie we might think it is a bit wanky. It might seem sort of a bit too cerebral.

You know I am just living in Byron and trying to work out how to write this bloody book and going through the agony of that and also wondering what I should do. And wondering what you should do has nothing to do with seeing yourself as part of a category or classification.^{xii}

Helen Garner also queried the investigation: 'I don't know why there would be such a group. There isn't one in fiction that I'm aware of, or if there is, I'm not part of it.'^{xiii}

When asked what sort of writer she is, she claims she always answers in the same way: 'I just say I "write books and journalism"'. If anyone presses for further details, I say I write fiction and non-fiction.'^{xiv}

Two of the authors interviewed had a clear and concise knowledge of the genre: journalist and author Margaret Simons, who took part in the *Media Report* segment on the topic in 2005; and author and academic John Dale.

Simons said that asking about 'creative non-fiction' and its existence within the Australian literary community was more to do with literary criticism than anything to do with its execution. She said mine was:

...very much a literary critic sort of comment, it's not how it's lived. I mean, yes you can categorise that way. That's the sort of comment you make after it's written and you have to categorise it, it's not the sort of comment you make when you're writing it. It's a reader's comment not a writer's comment I would say.

I don't mean to downgrade it, I'm just saying that – I mean why do we have to worry about all that?^{xv}

Simons has been involved in the scant debate for some time in Australia and was aware of the lack of discussion in Australia but she sees no need for collectivlabelling and likens the academic process to acting and drama criticism. She said:

Well I don't find it very interesting. I mean people have to have labels because they have to construct university courses in it. It's not very interesting is it? I'm being flippant...It's really nothing to do with it. I'm not saying it's invalid or illegitimate or whatever but it bears no relation to the act of writing. I mean it bears the same relationship to writing that drama criticism does to acting.

Which is not to say it's invalid or not useful or whatever and it's not to say there's never any bouncing off between the process. It doesn't really matter to doing it, no.^{xvi}

Simons has a simplistic attitude to what she does. She said:

I tell true stories, that's all I do when I'm writing what you call non fiction and I use that term too because I have failed to come up with a better one. Narrative journalism is the one I feel most comfortable with but that's only because it's got an absence of negatives about it. I mean call it what you like. It doesn't change the experience of writing it, it just doesn't. People love true stories, I mean they love stories but they love true stories and I think you know really, it's all, it sounds so hackneyed but it is really all the search for a meaning.^{xvii}

Because John Dale has worked as an academic within the academy for the past ten years he was perhaps the most knowledgeable and open to the discussion. Dale said:

I don't think the scene is a particular genre of people here. I mean Helen Garner stands to mind as one of the people who are very competent writers who use fictional techniques to write factual narratives but no, I don't think that anyone in the street would know about creative non fiction as a genre.^{xviii}

Dale was the most recent subject interviewee and I summed up for him that most of the authors, apart from David Marr, Margaret Simons and Helen Garner, had no real awareness of the genre. He replied:

...well most of them wouldn't know because it's not regarded as such, it's regarded as fiction or factual writing. But all creative non fiction is, it's just people who use fictional techniques to write factually. In America there's a history which grew out of Tom Wolfe and Capote and they made a big splash of creating something new or Capote did, about making the new thing which he was saying that his work wasn't a work of fiction, it wasn't fiction, it wasn't fact, it was something new. It was the non fiction novel and from that, it's developed.

I think that creative non fiction is a genre on its own. I think it's only through universities that creative non fiction has come to be regarded as a particular genre.^{xix}

Chloe Hooper dismisses the term creative non-fiction, categorically. She said:

As a term 'creative non-fiction' seems slightly laughable, almost twee. The term is silly and I'd never say that's what I'm doing.

I write fiction and non-fiction.^{xx}

But she does comment on the state of this type of writing in Australia, and sees it as a publishing market situation. She said:

It seems there aren't more authors in this area because traditionally there have not been the same publishing opportunities, nor the wide market, that, say, American non-fiction writers have enjoyed....Australian audiences can still read the *New Yorker* or *Granta*, but there is a larger cultural opportunity cost in that Australian stories aren't researched and written at the same high level. Stories tell us who we are as a people. They can give us a more nuanced, sophisticated sense of our history and culture.

I'm not a journalist by training, and I've never worked for a big media outlet, so I don't feel I can refer to myself as such. I've no doubt looking at a news story novelistically is essential when organising material into the most interesting, engaging shape. Certainly with a story such as the Palm Island death in custody, which is, by most measures, fairly unpalatable to mainstream Australians, I had a sense I had one shot at holding a reader's attention.

Non-fiction is easier and harder than fiction. I am currently enjoying dealing with imaginary characters, and not wrestling with folders full of court transcripts. Still, in non-fiction you just follow the tide; in fiction you have to do a lot of treading water until you find a good wave.^{xxi}

Paul McGeough is quite emphatic in how he sees himself, even though he claims he has not thought about it. He said:

I've never thought about it. Beyond journalist reporter, I've never tried to define myself. I think the product speaks for itself...you get judged by your work, you get judged by your output. I don't think you get judged because you have categorised me as a literary journalist. I don't know that I will necessarily be judged broadly as a literary journalist. I have written some books and I fully understand and expect those books will be judged in the book market as books.

The point of the craft or the art at that stage depending on what word you want to use is recognising the moment and seeing its value in conveying something. In telling the story, in making the most of being there to convey the story. I think it has to be evocative.^{xxii}

McGeough has developed his own differentiation between long form narrative writing and daily journalism. He said:

There are two kinds. There are the capital city journalists who drill down into the issues through capital city offices and leadership.

There are those of us who go down on the ground. Now those of us who go out on the ground are out on the ground for a reason. Because it is much more stimulating, challenging, rewarding. You have a huge canvas on which to write that you don't have when you are in a capital city. You have the local culture, the local exotica, the local food, the people, their stories and they take you up into the issue rather than coming down into the issue.

And I don't for a minute and I would hate for it to be thought that I actually disparage the capital city journalism because I don't. Because it has to be done.

Somebody has to bear witness. That is what it comes down to. Particularly with the more activist role that the Australian government tries to play in international affairs, somebody here has a duty to be out there observing at close quarters the consequences of the decisions the government makes.^{xxiii}

Memoirist Kate Holden posited a suggestion about the lack of recognition of the genre in Australia. She said: 'I don't know why it's not more recognised but perhaps because it is a cousin of journalism and journalism is not highly recognised as a literary form.' She went on to say she would be 'delighted' to be regarded as an Australian creative non-fiction writer but, like many of her colleagues interviewed, had never really thought of it. She continued:

The only thing about the word creative is it suggests imaginative ...and imaginative doesn't necessarily have to have that connotation it just means you're imagining your way into something. See I'd almost use a word like 'speculative' or something like that, even though speculative has an association with fantasy and so on, but something that is more engaged with the exploratory nature of that kind of non-fiction. I mean it's just a type of non-fiction isn't it? It's just that it's a particularly agile and

plastic kind. Something that was more related to the kind of embracive part of it, that you can use all sorts of little tit bits of history and poetry and other genres and it's so much more of a plastic form. But creative is not bad. I don't think creative is a bad term.^{xxiv}

Holden is one of the youngest of the authors interviewed and attributes the term creative non-fiction to a varied array of media, likening its consumption to our consumption of bread – we do it without thinking about it. She explained:

...as you say, people devour it avidly. It's very dispersed, it appears in all sorts of places. It appears in highly erudite literary magazine, literary journals, it appears in *The Age*, in the opinion page, it appears in the review pages, it's all over the place. It's here there and everywhere – blogs obviously can fit into this. It's a product that we consume without really thinking about it, like bread.

...people really like the sense of the authentic, in the middle of a culture which is very given to artifice and political miss-information and so on. I think we all really appreciate what appears to be the authentic, people are atomised in their society so it gives them a sense of corroboration and collaboration with other people. People read memoirs, especially I suppose for identification. They read it because they can see themselves in it. Lots of people identify with lots of different parts of my book, they say, 'That was just like me.' They read it to get out of their little world and to find something new. You know if you read a really fantastic literary essay about early Australian exploration, it's a transportation, literally.^{xxv}

Author and profile writer Greg Bearup differentiates between the work of a journalist and the work of a long form journalist or feature writer. He labels himself a 'magazine feature writer', again differentiating between a newspaper feature writer. He said:

I'm a journalist for *Good Weekend*^{xxvi} ...or writer for *Good Weekend*.

There's a big difference in what we do, yeah, I mean there is a lot more writing in what we do than in journalism and it's a different style of writing too, I mean ... it's the structure of the piece – it's a different form of writing.

Journalism is sort of sprinting each day whereas this (feature/profile writing) is sort of more fifteen hundred metres, five thousand metre sort of run.

And a book is a marathon.^{xxvii}

Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrooke seemed surprised to be included in my list of creative non-fiction writers. Their work is highly specialised and inhabits a unique place in the publishing market – extraordinarily beautiful coffee table travel/cook books. I asked Rushbrooke if she believed belonging to an identified genre of writers was important to either themselves personally, or their work. She said:

Well I don't know if it matters and I don't know why people choose to write

what they write other than I would imagine if you're driven to write fiction it's because you have the imagination or the creative spirit to do that. So to me writing this type of stuff is much easier because in a way it's reportage. But I guess non-fiction writers without kind of breaking them down into any sub-category they write about what they know, it's an area of expertise, whether it's academic writing or technical writing or about a particular discipline. So I imagine it's a function of what you know I would have thought and then how you write it is a whole other issue.

I mean for us it's a no brainer because you want to make it appealing to people

and the way to me what makes things appealing is it's about the people, it's the stories, it's the sort of personal lives. And I think what I'm saying here about it being a product other than an expression of a culture ... I think if you look at a culture you can trace its history through the food ... that's something that's really important to both of us really but probably mainly more me because I'm the one that's doing that side of the book. But you can tell people individual stories and their stories as being part of a social grouping and the context in terms of social history, ancient history, all proven, all through the ingredients and the dishes.^{xxviii}

Estelle Blackburn was looking for a way to tell the stories of two gross miscarriages of justice. The only problem was, they were more than forty years old and she had to find a way to grab the public's attention. She said:

I was amazed to find there are all these descriptions for it, all these words for it...I started as a straight journalist, started out at a

newspaper, started as a straight journalist but now I've discovered that style I much prefer it, I much prefer to bring things to life and make it interesting.

I thought nobody's going to read a dry old thesis by me about John Button. Nobody. So that's when I came across Capote and Norman Mailer as well I thought that's the style I need. That's going to make people read it.^{xxix}

Only after *Broken Lives*^{xxx} was published did Blackburn realise the way she was writing was a burgeoning genre. She was approached by Murdoch University and offered a scholarship to write the story behind the writing of *Broken Lives*. She was told the university wanted to 'legitimise this genre of journalism'. She continued:

So then I understood. There's literary journalism, they're trying to legitimise it as a genre of journalism but it did, it just came absolutely naturally to me but having discovered that, since being a straight journalist, I love it and that's the way I write now.^{xxxi}

Out of all the authors interviewed to date, the eldest was the only one who cared to label herself and her work, and who was proud to label herself and her work – just not my label. Doris Pilkington Garimara is a 72 year old Aboriginal elder. Author of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*^{xxxi}, when I suggested I was including her in list of Australian creative non-fiction writers, she did not respond immediately. Then she quietly, and with great dignity, rebuffed:

I've been an indigenous or an Aboriginal writer for years and I'm honoured to carry that label because it's what I'm known by overseas anyway. The Aboriginal writer or the indigenous writer that's from Australia.^{xxxi}

I could not, neither did I want to, argue with her.

Conclusion

Summing up, apart from Pilkington Garimara who clearly knows how she is regarded and is proud of her own label, only three of my subjects had really thought about the genre of creative non-fiction: Margaret Simons, John Dale and Helen Garner. Kate Holden, Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrooke, Estelle Blackburn and David Leser were quite accepting of the label, albeit an unknown one, although Leser distinctly argued he thought it unnecessary. Chloe Hooper clearly had no interest in the label at all, even claiming it was 'silly'. Both Paul McGeough and Greg Bearup see themselves as journalists,

although Bearup conceded there is a difference between writing daily journalism and long form journalism. While Leser perhaps was the most polemical, David Marr was the most forceful in his response.

There is something idiosyncratically Australian about the collection of responses I gathered from the authors targeted in my research, relative to the international debate. Idiosyncratic because the dismissive nature of the responses carry what Mark Mordue would call a 'larrikin' element – they really go against the gravitas accorded the discussion in the USA and UK.

I believe the key to this difference lies with what Hartsock has identified as a 'political' problem in the USA – a split between English faculties and media faculties within the academy. Perhaps competing academic voices and forces in the USA, following closely after the literary furore Tom Wolfe and company created in the early '70s onwards with their New Journalism, catapulted the burgeoning of the identity of the genre.

This split definitely did not occur in Australia. All scholarly investigation emanates from tertiary communication courses, including journalism and creative writing. There has been no discord between faculties – as demonstrated, there has been no real discussion. But Norman Sims addresses this exact notion in a recent essay. He calls on international recognition of other national discourses on creative non-fiction to balance out American scholarship on the subject:

We need to include those international forms of literary journalism, with their variations, as a corrective to the focus on North American literary journalism... Despite all the North American scholarship on the subject, we should not conclude that literary journalism is only an American phenomenon. It appears in other cultures with variations in form (Sims 2009, p.10).

And I would add, 'variations' not just in forms but also in opinions. Sims' writing thoroughly underpins my findings. And although the discourse is a definite academic construct, I believe it needs to be made in Australia, despite practitioners' disregard or disinterest of the discussion. Sims talks about the historian James Carey's call for 'a systematic cultural history of journalism' (Sims 2009, p.7) including an international perspective of creative non-fiction writing, in all its 'different national manifestations' (Sims 2009, p.9).

This paper is hopefully just the beginning of an Australian contribution.

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Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrooke, personal interview, March 22, 2009 (Melbourne)

Margaret Simons, personal interview, April 18, 2009 (Melbourne)

Paul McGeough, personal interview, May 25, 2009 (Sydney)

Doris Pilkington Garimara, personal interview, June 23, 2009 (Exmouth)

Estelle Blackburn, personal interview, June 28, 2009 (Fremantle)

Greg Bearup, personal interview, December 11, 2009 (Sydney)

John Dale, personal interview, December 18, 2009 (Sydney)

David Marr, email interview, January 13, 2010

Helen Garner, email interview, January 19, 2010

Chloe Hooper, email interview, January 25, 2010

Dr Sue Joseph is a Lecturer at University of Technology Sydney. She has been a journalist for nearly thirty years, completing a cadetship at ACP before travelling to Europe in the early '80s. Based in London, she was stringer for several Fleet Street newspapers, national radio and television stations. She also worked on many regional publications in London, and freelanced to publications in Australia, including The Bulletin. Her last post in London was as Managing Editor of two London weekly magazines.

Notes:

ⁱ 2009, *Literary Journalism Studies*, Inaugural Issue, p.9

ⁱⁱ 2009, *Literary Journalism Studies*, Inaugural Issue, p.10

ⁱⁱⁱ The Book Show, April 21, 2009

^{iv} Creative Non-Fiction Conference, Sheraton Hotel, Austin, 2005

^v interview by Ramona Koval, *The Book Show*, ABC Radio National, April 21, 2009

^{vi} ABS, October 2008

^{vii} *The Literary Journalist and Degrees of Detachment: An Ethical Investigation*, Lambert, 2009

^{viii} Literary Journalism, *The Media Report*, Radio National, June 23, 2005

^{ix} Mordue interviewed by Jackie May, 2005

^x email interview, January 13, 2010

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} personal interview, March 14, 2009

^{xiii} email interview, January 19, 2010

^{xiv} *ibid*

^{xv} personal interview, April 18, 2009

^{xvi} *ibid*

^{xvii} *ibid*

^{xviii} personal interview, December 18, 2009

^{xix} *ibid*

^{xx} email interview, January 25, 2010

^{xxi} *ibid*

^{xxii} personal interview, May 25, 2009

^{xxiii} *ibid*

^{xxiv} personal interview, March 21, 2009

^{xxv} *ibid*

^{xxvi} Weekly colour supplement magazine, *Sydney Morning Herald*

^{xxvii} personal interview, December 11, 2009

^{xxviii} personal interview, March 22, 2009

^{xxix} personal interview, June 28, 2009

^{xxx} published 1998

^{xxxi} personal interview, June 28, 2009

^{xxxii} adapted into the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*, 2002, directed by Phillip Noyce

^{xxxiii} personal interview, June 23, 2009