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### Creative Nonfiction Strategies in “I Can Feel Him Breathing”

At its core, creative nonfiction (CNF) is about writing true stories artfully. Authors use writing strategies like description, scene, reflection, dialogue (both internal and external), contrast, context, balancing public and private perspectives, structure, research, and intimate detail to engage readers. These techniques have been explored in this course via *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* by Lee Gutkind as a primary source. Thus, this book serves as the basis of my exploration with other course readings to deepen understanding. I will apply the CNF elements shared in course texts and apply them to my reflection of “I Can Feel Him Breathing” by Tara McGuire.

Carol Bly suggests that people read CNF for three reasons: to see how we might manage in that author's circumstances, to learn from the author how we might give our own life more meaning, or we read the authors circumstances to find parallels and nonparallel with our own (xix). I related in all three ways when reading McGuire's essay. McGuire tells a story of visiting an opioid overdose site in Vancouver. She wants to speak with someone using heroin about why they started using. The story begins in McGuire's home, where a sense of disenchantment permeates. The unhinged door and undone lawn signal a lack of energy before the author explicitly states it. Immediately, we see the show, don't tell approach CNF posits in the opening scene (Gutkind). In addition to bringing the reader into the emotional environment, McGuire also

engages the readers sense of touch, sound, and smell as she describes being in her partners embrace before departing for the overdose prevention site. “He envelopes me. Chest, muscle, heartbeat, soap.” The pair look out onto a memorial garden made for someone named Holden.

As McGuire walks down East Hastings Street, towards the overdose prevention site, the author uses elements of scene to bring the reader into the environment with her. Walking past a community garden with “bountiful...lettuce, kale, and tall sunflowers.” The author takes time to describe a young girl, pushing her scooter, “one little piston leg propelling her along” as the guardian tries to keep up. McGuire closes this scene with the sentence “the children rarely wait for you.” Here, we are first introduced to the parent-child context that is threaded through the narrative. In the reflection following this scene, the author considers the “hundreds, no, thousands, of sons and daughters have birthed their last exhales in this postal code.” In our course reading, Phillip Lopate discusses how authors bring their entire identity and history to the “I” in their writing. Readers must be brought up to speed about which who this “I” is and what element of that “I” they are going to relate to (178). As McGuire references a parent-child dynamic, her “I” and viewpoint start to take form.

Additionally, as McGuire cites the number of deaths that have occurred in the East Hastings postal code, the author expands her lens to bring in the public sphere. A reflection on the opioid crisis at large depicts how the authors sentiments shifted from “I never cared that much...they were just new stories or statistics I could ignore” to “I can’t look away anymore.” Along with citing how opioid overdoses are public issue, the authors original feelings are also a connection to the public sphere in that many people not directly impacted by the crisis have the option to “look away.” The author balances the public and personal sphere. A technique that Gutkind highlights as the key to striking a universal chord (181).

As McGuire continues toward the overdose prevention site, another reference to Holden's death is made. This time, the death is connected to heroin use. McGuire reflects on Holden's substance use and untimely passing through a series of questions. The author wonders why Holden never confided in the friend he was staying with. "Maybe he was worried about what she would think of him?" "Maybe he was planning to quite anyway to why bother?" McGuire's speculations bring us closer to Holden as a character. It also reveals the authors desire to know more. This internal dialogue is critical as it sheds light on what is driving the authors visit to the overdose prevention site.

Upon arriving at the overdose prevention site, the author meets with a woman named Sarah. McGuire shares that she connected with Sarah via Twitter while "grief-mining about heroin." This is when McGuire's relationship to Holden is revealed. Holden is the authors 21-year-old son "who had died of and overdose." The reader can now fully connect the parent-child context that McGuire has been developing in the narrative. McGuire's "I" is now fully developed as a grieving mother whose child has died due to a substance and experience that she doesn't fully understand. The author now brings us explicitly into her inner experience, describing herself as "weeping for hours at a time and spending large portions of each day in bed unable to move or speak, obsessing on the same question – why would Holden turn to heroin?" The author and reader both arrive at the overdose prevention site with clarity about why they are there. This is critical as the next part of the story moves into an immersion in the overdose prevention site environment. The writing structure helps develop a "compelling whole" that keeps the reader connected to the narrative as missing elements are addressed before moving to far along the story (Gutkind 101).

Another element McGuire uses throughout her essay is descriptive contrast. An example of this is when the author describes what she sees on East Hastings Street versus other parts of Vancouver. The street leading up to the overdose prevention site is covered in “chewing gum and garbage.” A “man...with stained pants pulled down below his boney knees” is seen “shooting a needle into his thigh while a woman crouches beside him watching.” The reader's senses are engaged again as the scent of “disinfectant, cigarette smoke, and...those round white pucks they put in port-a-potties” fills the air. In contrast, the author thinks about the people just “two blocks away, on Water Street...taking pictures of themselves in front of the steam clock, buying carved totems and eating oysters.” This contrast is deepened with dialogue as a man suddenly asks the author if she would “like to see a guy fucking a donkey?” This startles both the reader and author back into the present moment.

This use of dialogue continues as the author waits for Sarah to arrive at the overdose prevention site. Along with the author, readers observe the interactions between several people. Exchanges like “piss off”, “fuck you, fucker”, “eat my ass and die” are shared to develop a kind of crass and vulgar environment. Sarah confirms this explicitly as she arrives and checks in with McGuire. McGuire refers to the donkey video she has just seen. Sarah replies, “oh, these are not the most charming people.” The two then pivot to discuss why McGuire is visiting. McGuire would like to speak with someone while they smoke heroin.

The next scene is developed with the use of contrast that hints at broader stereotypes that exist about people who use substances. The author first describes a person that she thinks she is going to speak with. A man “standing barefoot on the hot sand, curled fingertips dripping salt water...” The author then describes Calvin, the young man she will actually be speaking with. A man with a “carved jaw, sitting straight-backed...his checkered shirt...ironed and buttoned up to

the collar.” These two very different descriptions illuminate the expectations both the author and the reader may have of a heroin user. It subtly challenges personal and public stereotypes and depicts heroin users within a range of outward appearances.

As we move into the interaction between McGuire and Calvin, dialogue and description are used to connect the characters. We see the two reflect on a common experience of losing a loved one due to an overdose before the author moves into inquiry. McGuire then asks Calvin, “...how did you start using?” Calvin shares that his Dad introduced him to heroin. “I had to decide if I wanted to be with my Dad. So I tried it” says Calvin. Here we see a subtle but important connection to the parent-child context that has been weaved throughout the narrative. In this case, we see this context reversed in a way the author seems to be surprised by. Instead of a confused and grieving parent, we hear about a parent who brought heroin into their child’s life. McGuire brings the reader into her own moment of reflection of parallel and nonparallel realities that Bly suggests is critical to CNF.

Another interesting feature of McGuire’s writing is how the element of immersion is utilized. A variation from how immersion is traditionally described by Gutkind, McGuire is amid research and immersion during the essay. On a journey of seeking answers, we are brought along to experience McGuire’s first visit to an overdose prevention site. We bear witness as the author steps into a new environment. We are exposed to the internal and external questions that reflect inner conflict – an element Lopate deems necessary to keep readers engaged (178). We see the author conduct a sort of informal interview with a heroin user to better understand their experience. Instead of a purely reflective essay, the reader is immersed in the author’s environment, conflict, and question-answer process. The author reveals the realities of an overdose prevention site, from the “charming people” to the sanitary “boxes of medical

supplies.” And as we listen to the interaction between McGuire and Calvin, we are also educated about substance use and terminology like “chasing the dragon” – which refers to following smoke with a pipe to inhale the substance. As readers, we learn as the author learns.

The reader is also inundated with intimate detail. McGuire describes Calvin setting up his foil and pipe and his demeanor after inhalation with precision. She describes Calvin’s movements and facial expression – “like syrup...eyes open and glassy, face ...[having] lost interest.” McGuire also engages the senses as she describes the smell of “road paving and burnt sugar and gasoline and sauna steam” as Calvin exhales. We also see intimate detail and contrast combined to describe the experience of using heroin. Calvin shares that he feels “...warm, and all wrapped up. Like everything’s good.” McGuire describes his contrasting expression as “deadpan”. Calvin speaks, “I know it’s not, though...I know I’m tricking myself.” These are detailing the reader would not know from the external environment. McGuire artfully uses intimate detail to bring readers into the experience in a way we would have otherwise missed (Gutkind 178). This reminded me of how Jowita Bydlowska describes her bodily sensations in response to drinking alcohol, “the warmth spreading from my chest, down my belly, straight into my cunt...” (38-41). These are piece of sensory information the reader would not have access to if the author did not deliberately share. Though not every use of intimate detail will add more meaning to the readers life, it does aid in understanding the experiences of others and the sensations and meaning they derive from those experiences (Bly). This in turn enriches our understanding of the world.

Toward the end of her interaction with Calvin, McGuire shares feeling “protective” of him. This reinforces the parent-child dynamic and the complex emotions that arise in the context of substance use. McGuire shares a sense of embarrassment for having “invaded [Calvin’s]

intimate world.” The author describes Calvin as “sweet and generous and thoughtful” and expresses regret for bringing her own pain to him when “he has so much of his own.” As McGuire gets up to leave, she describes Calvin straightening as though he has “remembered the manners his mother or grandmother taught him.” Calvin embraces McGuire. “His shirt... smells like laundry detergent” and the two “stand there, together, for a moment, a woman and a young man” and McGuire shares, “I can feel him breathing.” The closing scene both humanizes Calvin, deteriorating any preexisting stereotypes and offers a moment of closure as McGuire holds a young man, similar in age to her deceased son.

In this reflection, I have noted several elements of creative nonfiction that were used by McGuire. I have discussed the use of scene, conflict, internal and external dialogue, a compelling structure, contrast, description, immersion, and intimate detail. I have also noted how McGuire strikes a universal chord by balancing the public and personal sphere as she references the opioid crisis and stereotypes about those who use substances. The overarching theme of the parent-child relationship also develops McGuire’s “I” as a mother throughout the narrative. Finally, we see McGuire’s excellent use of structure to develop an engaging narrative from start to finish. Throughout the story we see a mother experiencing internal conflict, in search of answers. At the end, we see a mother arrive at larger conclusions about substance use and pain, beyond the simple mechanics of inhalation.

Works Cited

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## Class Discussion

We have discussed Gutkind's universal chord in this course on several occasions. Part of this discussion has been how some of us experienced impatience with Jowita Bydlowska's repetition in *Drunk Mom*. On the other hand, it has been shared that those with an experience of addiction have found *Drunk Mom* to be live changing. Phillip Lopate suggests that we should not filter our writing for the sake of sparing people's feelings (178). Lee Gutkind suggests that we should reread our writing from the stance of the reader to ensure our writing translates (62-63). In fact, Gutkind goes as far to say that "if [your writing] doesn't evoke the emotions you are expecting...you should assume a red flag" (102).

- 1. We see McGuire go from indifferent to opioids to deeply curious because her experience changed. Applying this to reading and writing, do you think that it is possible for folks without a similar lived experience to resonate with our writing fully?**
- 2. As writers, where do we draw the line between being completely immersed in our narrative, without fear or reservation, versus tailoring our work for our audiences? On that note, when does a writer know that they should endeavour publishing versus keeping a piece for personal process, relevance, or catharsis? I often wonder what my favourite authors didn't publish and why.**

I think we can agree that at a baseline, writing requires for the intended emotions to be evoked, even if we cannot guarantee the depth of those emotions for each reader. However, as a reader, do you find works that evoke unexpected emotions as more or less rewarding? I quote Bly's three reasons for writing creative nonfiction.

- a) To see how we might manage in that author's circumstances.
- b) To learn from the author how we might give our own life more meaning.
- c) To find parallel and nonparallel elements between the author's and our own circumstances.

I find intended emotions deeply resonate and transformative. However, I tend to learn more deeply about myself when reflecting on the source of unintended emotions.

**3. What are your experiences with intended and unintended emotions? What journey/reflection/connection do each offer for you?**