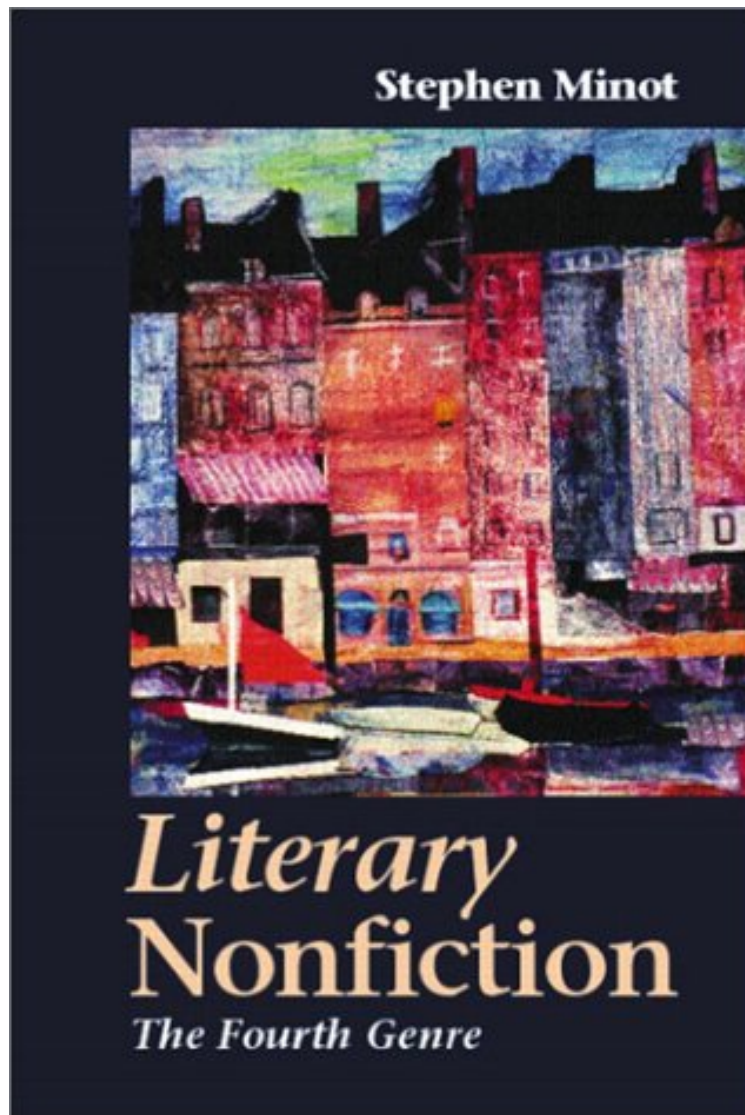


Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre

Stephen Minot

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This book is an introduction to creative, or literary, nonfiction and to the art of writing fresh and original work.

Presenting clear guidelines and fresh approaches to creativity, this well-written book explores the six basic approaches to non-fiction writing, differentiates between what is creative and what is utilitarian, and describes honest as opposed to deceitful work. Using short example essays to illustrate the key approaches of personal experience, biographical sketch, opinion, reflection, place, and historical incident, this book stresses the importance of learning to write by reading. Useful for individuals who wish to examine nonfiction essays critically, with the intention of writing themselves. Also, those who keep literary journals will benefit from this book.

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About the Author STEPHEN MINOT, Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside, has been teaching creative writing for thirty years. A writer himself, Minot has authored three novels, two collections of short stories, and three textbooks. His numerous short stories have appeared in such publications as *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The Kenyan*, *The Paris*, and *The Sewanee*, among others. His work has been chosen to appear in *The O. Henry Prize Stories* collection, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Story*, and *New American Stories*. Over the course of his career, Professor Minot has been the recipient of the Atlantic First Award as well as the Saxton Memorial Fellowship and the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for writing.

Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. This text had its inception at a national conference of writers. I sat in on a panel made up of widely published nonfiction writers, prepared to team a thing or two. Before the readings, they discussed the genre. One of them said cheerfully, "Just what is creative nonfiction? Who knows? I guess it includes just about everything." I wouldn't have minded if the statement had been made at a gathering of electrical engineers. They have their area of expertise and we writers have ours. But these panelists were writers. Experts. We came to hear them, pencils in hand. If electrical engineers were that careless about their trade, there would be fires all over town. Clearly, a textbook was called for. The book, I decided, should explain why creative or literary nonfiction is different from utilitarian nonfiction. Significantly and definably different. That would be step one. The book should help students to examine literary nonfiction with the care it deserves. It should guide them in the art of close reading, their key to writing fresh and insightful literary nonfiction on their own. My hope was to write an anti-textbook textbook. That is, a work that would persuade readers that the most effective study of literary nonfiction is literary nonfiction itself. Why write a book that challenges its own existence? Because not all students have mastered the art of close reading, and because without that rewarding and essential ability, they may find it difficult to improve their writing on their own. There is a kissing-cousin relationship between this volume and my other textbook, *Three Genres: The Writing of Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*, also published by Prentice Hall. Or perhaps they are more like grandfather and grandson. *Three Genres* has been in print for close to 40 years and is now in its seventh edition. For a while I was tempted to include literary nonfiction in that text, replacing the drama section. But the demand for a nonfiction text seemed too great for such an amalgamation. Here's the approach. Part One has eight chapters that define the genre, describing its various forms and giving advice on how to establish a focus and a sense of structure. There is an important chapter on literary aspects, those pleasurable elements generally ignored in utilitarian prose. Another chapter deals with ethical concerns: what is right by everyone's standards, what's in the gray zone, and what is just dead wrong and can land one in jail. The final chapter in this section deals with how to read. Why does this come last? Because it takes that long to persuade many readers that they're probably missing much of the subtly and beauty of literary writing. Part Two includes 14 contemporary essays. They have been selected to illustrate different types of literary nonfiction, such as personal experience, the biographical sketch, opinion pieces, a sense of place, and the like. Eight of these essays are analyzed to help students see how the work approaches that kind of essay. The other six essays are marked "For discussion." That means I have, with admirable restraint, kept quiet. My only guidance is a brief introduction entitled "What to look for." Students will have read one or two somewhat similar essays; now they are being asked to do their own analysis. I want to encourage students to read analytically on their own. Once they can do that, they will have the power and ability to discover their own unique voices. Although I have been describing this text as if it were designed for classroom use only, I hope it will be useful for those many individuals who are not presently taking a course. For them, essays marked "For discussion" can be thought of as "For thoughtful examination." Those who keep literary journals will benefit from writing down their own analysis and insights. The essays vary greatly. Some are the work of distinguished and widely published authors; others, as you can see in "Notes on Contributors," have not published widely. I want to assure students that it is possible to write effective and even publishable nonfiction at any age. In addition, some essays are fairly straightforward, and others make use of flashbacks and symbolic elements. Each essay, however, illustrates a particular type of literary nonfiction, and each has elements well worth studying. The writers included here represent a variety of racial and ethnic

backgrounds. Students should know that literary nonfiction provides a dual function for minorities. It can help to define the cultural heritage for fellow members, and it can explain those traditions and values to the larger community. I have always enjoyed contact with instructors, students, and writers through e-mail. I hope to continue this tradition with readers of this text. My e-mail address is s.minot@juno.com. We are also preparing a Web site under the name of [threegenres](http://threegenres.com). Writers are a scattered tribe, especially in the United States, and we owe it to ourselves to create a virtual community through the Internet. I owe special thanks to my wife, Virginia, whose artwork graces the cover of this text as well as that of the seventh edition of *Three Genres*. In addition, I am grateful for the enthusiasm and assistance of Carrie Brandon and Maureen Benicasa at Prentice Hall. Of the many individuals who nominated essays for this text, I am particularly grateful to my colleagues Chris Buckley and Tom Morton and also to Dick Dreselly of Brunswick, Maine. I look forward to hearing from those who use this text. Stephen Minot s.minot@juno.com