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Creative non-fiction in outdoor studies

Abstract

In this chapter we explore the use of creative nonfiction as an alternative to more traditional strategies for writing-up qualitative research in outdoor studies. We propose that it provides a mode of representation in which both the native's point of view and the author's theoretical lens can remain, but the complexities and inconsistencies of lived experiences, theoretical and conceptual contingencies, ethical imperatives, and issues of accessibility and diffusion can perhaps be better addressed than with traditional methods. We use our own story about the juxtaposition of parenting and 'serious' climbing to elucidate the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of creative nonfiction.

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What is Creative Nonfiction?

Creative nonfiction is arguably better shown rather than described, before it can be usefully explained. The below excerpt is taken from our research about the challenges of time for parents of young children trying to pursue their own interests as serious climbers:

> *Emma and Bill's mud-streaked Fiesta swings into the nearly full car park at the popular end of Stanage. Sam – wrapped in so many layers to be almost spherical – waddles quickly towards them as they exit the car. They had watched over Sam a number of times since Liz met them at a local climbing club shortly after Sam was born. Emma was as bubbly as Bill was quiet. Neither was a serious climber and instead preferred kayaking, but they loved the gritstone and were always keen to get out and were flexible on time and destination, which was just what Liz and Jack needed these days.*
>
> *"Hello you three", Emma greets Sam with open arms. "So nice to be getting out at last", she says, sweeping her long brown hair into a ponytail.*
>
> *"Oh, I know", Liz agrees. The rain and snow over the winter had led to many long hours and money spent at indoor bouldering walls around the Peak.*
>
> *The group begins the walk up the path to the crag. Sam at a half run doesn't take long to stumble and fall. He begins to cry.*
>
> *"It's alright, little man, you're okay," Jack helps him to his feet. "Just watch where you are going. Daddy will walk a bit slower." He engulfs his son's small hand and leads him slowly to the crag where Mike is warming up at the Goliath area,*
>
> *"Are you sleeping at the crag now?" Jack shouts from a distance.*
>
> *"I've only got this morning before I'm on double-trouble duty, so no wasting time for me," Mike replies.*

(Clayton and Coates, 2015, p241)

What should be immediately clear is that this is written somewhat differently to the majority of academic works in the broad field of outdoor studies. We dispensed with more traditional modes of representation used in qualitative research, such as carefully selected verbatim quotes that unambiguously state the participants' points of view, and the immediate explanation, from some theoretical standpoint or another, of each and every extract of data. Instead, we used techniques for fictional writing to convey the findings of our fieldwork in a way that was more accessible and, we argued, more inclusive.

Creative nonfiction can be a vexed term. Most agree on the essential idea that it is an analytic practice that borrows from the literary arts, where empirical data are woven into a story akin to a fictional text (Cheney, 2001; Clayton, 2010; Gutkind, 2012). However, the full particulars of how this is done and especially the permissible scale of fictionalisation are subject to the reasoning of the individual author. That is to say that the 'creative' in creative nonfiction may refer simply to the substitution of traditional academic prose with that of the literary novel or to a more extensive use of dramatic license.

Creative nonfiction, then, takes many forms. Leavy (2013) notes that it is such an expansive genre that it can be difficult to synthesise and delineate, and there may be any number of qualitative research projects published that we might call creative nonfiction, and perhaps several literary works that can be considered qualitative research projects. What they share in common is that they are "aesthetically *and* substantively impressive" (Barone, 2008, p107, emphasis not in the original). Creative nonfictions are literary essays and, whatever fiction is employed within them, the stories remain grounded in witnessed or experienced 'truth'. Sparkes (2002) highlights the importance of 'being there' and producing data about specific events using research protocols, to appeal to the same kind of authority and trust that are the

measure of any social scientist. Ethnographic methods are perhaps the most commonly used by creative nonfiction writers, with many of these writers labelling their work 'ethnographic fiction' or 'ethnographic creative nonfiction' (e.g. Behar, 2001; Inckle, 2010; Smith, 2013). While a thoroughgoing ethnographic design is not requisite, it can be advantageous because it allows full immersion in the reality under study, which can aid in the creation of the kind of detailed scene, character development and empathy, and absorbing narrative that are the hallmarks of literary works.

Creative nonfiction in outdoor studies: Some examples of practice

Creative nonfiction has been usefully employed across many academic planes, including sport, health, and recreation research, for some years and is becoming relatively commonplace. However, related fields of leisure, adventure education, outdoor studies, and lifestyle sports, have been slower to adopt fictional techniques. There are a few noteworthy exceptions. Peacock, Carless and McKenna (2018) co-developed (with the participant) an evocative first-person account of one military officer's struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and his experience, and the purported benefits, of an adapted adventurous training programme for recovering military personnel. Carless *et al* (2014) similarly used crafted first-person stories of adventure training experiences in the recovery of two soldiers' with serious physical disabilities. In both papers, the soldiers' accounts from interview are woven into more fluid stories, but remain faithful to the experiences and emotions expressed by the soldiers themselves. In this way, the 'truth' is reported, but is more accessible, evocative, and less disjointed, as the excerpt below demonstrates:

> *[Y]esterday I walked a fair bit – that hurt like hell. And the climbing, you know, I was bricking it beforehand to be honest. I'm not scared of heights, but I don't much like them. And, you know, with one leg that I can't move how am I always gonna*

keep three points of contact? Ha ha! That'd mean I just couldn't move! But once they got me up there, I kind of used that fear, I guess to help me focus – to think about what I had to do and could do to make the climb. I mean as a soldier, I always hoped for the chance to use my training in action – I'd have hated to have all that training and never see any action. And I think a lot of us are like that. I wanted the fear, the adrenalin of contact. In those situations, the sheer fear – of being shot, say – keeps you going. You just have to keep going. So the fear focuses you on what needs to be done. And it was a bit like that with the climbing.

(Carless *et al*, 2014, p128)

Further, Higgins and Wattchow (2013) use creative nonfiction to draw out the embodied and rational experiences of a descent down the River Spey in Scotland by outdoor education students. The writers here go beyond a process of enrichment of a first-person narrative, as in the examples above, and employ new levels of fiction in which the students' experiences are combined and represented within a fictionalised dialogue between tutor and student:

"OK. Take the Spey descent we did a few months ago. It really seemed to be a trip about asking questions, but there was so much going on. And we never really talked a lot about getting any answers. I guess I'm finding it difficult committing to asking questions that we never seem to resolve, that we never shut down."

"There's a lot going on during an experience like that. And it's early in the programme. The range of students in the group, and the staff as well, come from such diverse learning and cultural backgrounds . . ."

"Yeah. Some of the other students seemed so comfortable. They've been in a canoe or kayak before so they're not dealing with trying to learn the skills. Others seem more familiar with the style of thinking you seem to be after."

"How did you find the paddling side of things on the Spey?"

> *"When I started it felt like I was going to tip in all the time when we were in fast moving water, so I was really tight, just focussing on the water immediately up ahead. Quite scared at times. Then the canoe was loaded with all of our equipment. Things seemed to be moving so fast at times—decisions being made on the run. When we came to the rapids they just looked like a mess to me. I couldn't see the lines or eddies you were talking about. Then we'd get onto a flat bit and you'd be telling stories about the surrounding landscape, bridges, buildings, the geology or land ownership. To be frank, I felt pretty overwhelmed."*
>
> (Higgins and Wattchow, 2013, p25)

Our own work took a similar approach, conveying multiple experiences through composite characters (Clayton and Coates, 2015). Instead of a reflective dialogue, however, we employed a 'real time' story of a 'typical' weekend for traditional (heterosexual, dual) parents who climb. As a more complete story, further techniques of fictional writing were needed, such as a surplus of detail to set the scene and the use of inner dialogue that help to convey meaning and experience in a more fluid way and also help the reader to themselves reside in the scene we depict. We will provide some examples and explanations of how and why we did this later in the chapter.

Why use creative nonfiction?

All of the researchers above used creative nonfiction not because it was in vogue or for any form of qualitative insurgency, but rather because it fit the analytical and dissemination needs of their research agendas. For us, creative nonfiction offered three crucial benefits that could not be found in more traditional approaches. First, given that the British climbing scene is relatively small, we wanted to do all we could to ensure the anonymity of our participants, and the use of fictional methods, such as composite characters and adjustments of time and place,

can be useful to help protect the identities of those involved, without the need to lose the rich detail of actual happenings (see also Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Second, the lived experiences of our participants were thwart with complexity, full of competing discourses and contradictory feelings and emotions of many layers. This 'truth', we thought, could not be done justice through conventional means of detached description and presentation of interview quotes, and could not be interpreted from a singular standpoint. Frank (2000, p483) wrote that there is "a possibility of portraying a complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in a theoretical explication". She is not alone in this thinking. Across social science disciplines, the use of fiction, and fictional techniques in nonfiction, has been heralded as a possible solution to issues of what Bauman (2000) refers to as the 'expertocracy' of social science, interpreting away the plight of individuals. Many exponents of creative nonfiction, including ourselves, regularly cite Laurel Richardson and the difference between 'knowing' through narrative and 'telling' through traditional academic writing (Richardson, 1994, 1997) to support their case that stories might better account for complexities and especially contradictions that are inherent in lived experiences and that cannot be contained within any particular scientific frame or located within any one metanarrative. In other words, creative nonfiction can help researchers to face the consequences of the "endemic contingency and uncertainty of human condition" (Bauman, 2000, p213).

Third, because our research arguably catered to a limited audience and represented a fairly exclusive group of people, but, we felt, simultaneously generated themes and outlooks important for a wider population, we wanted better access to that wider population. Gutkind (1997) argues that the most basic function of creative nonfiction is to capture a subject in such a way that anyone and everyone will find it interesting and want to read more about it.

Traditional academic texts, it is argued, are quite simply boring (Caulley, 2008; Richardson, 2000) and boring texts do not generate the same level of engagement, learning, and diffusion as do interesting, absorbing, and entertaining ones.

How to do creative nonfiction

As we have already seen from the excerpts of creative nonfictions presented in this chapter, there is no single, accepted form that they should take and, equally, there is no clear and accepted method of generating a creative nonfiction. What follows in this section of the chapter, then, is a discussion of *our* vision and the techniques we used and the reasoning behind them. We will begin here with some more general discussion or debate about the place and use of theory in creative nonfiction writing, and then suggest how we wanted our story to be judged as effective, and how we tried to ensure that effectiveness.

Theory in creative nonfiction

The use of theory in creative nonfiction remains a point of contention. Many argue that creative nonfiction can be a useful technique for *generating* theory, where different readings of a story can compete with one another and 'open up' theory production (Frank, 2010; Smith, McGannon and Williams, 2016), but should the writers themselves employ theory frameworks to explain their stories? Conceivably, all works of scholarly writing are at least tinged with theory because one cannot simply detach oneself from one's macro-knowledge during the writing or research processes. But it is what the writer does about this knowledge, how and how much they 'confess' or make explicit to the reader, which is up for debate. We have seen above that central to researchers' rationales for choosing creative nonfiction is the desire to allow 'alternative readings' of their stories. In this vein, some creative nonfiction writers offer

no explanation of their stories at all (e.g. Bruce, 2000; Douglas and Carless, 2010) because it is "futile to try to summarize the insights the story provides [since] these insights are best expressed through the story itself" (Douglas and Carless, 2010, p347). Others, however, such as Clayton (2010) and Gearity and Mills (2012) more explicitly impose a theory framework on the reader, interrupting their stories with explanatory passages that draw on particular theorists, revealing to the reader the writer's ongoing processes of clarification and explanation.

In our creative nonfiction of parents who are also 'serious' climbers we employed the ideas of Michel Foucault to understand the experiences depicted in our story, but we were deliberately cautious in our approach, noting that while our "analytic lens and written account are coloured, but not saturated by a Foucauldian and late-modern thesis, this is intended to be neither hidden nor obtrusive and [is noted] only as a pre-story and epistemological confession of sorts" (Clayton and Coates, 2015, p236). Here we wanted to show *our* workings whilst simultaneously acknowledging and encouraging alternative readings. For us, the very idea of *alternative* readings implies that any one reading may have credence but may not take precedence over another reading.

The debate about how theory should be used in creative nonfiction is almost certainly set to continue, but of importance is the separation of the story and the theoretical explication. All stories contain a theoretical signposting (Jones, 2006) and may show theory or resonate with theory but, significantly, they must allow other theoretical possibilities to emerge (Smith, McGannon and Williams, 2016).

Writing and judging creative nonfiction

Creative nonfiction, while purposely unalike more conventional qualitative writing practices, is not exempt from the requirements of quality, rigour, and relevance that are demanded of all academic endeavour. However, it would be unreasonable to subject 'new' and 'traditional' writing practices to the same measures of quality. No such measures can be absolute and, in all qualitative research practices, it is important that accepted characteristics and measures continue to evolve within communities of practice to develop standards (Preissle, 2013). To that end, useful provisional lists of some of the main characteristics of 'good' creative nonfictions are provided by Sparkes (2002) and Smith, McGannon and Williams (2016). For us, however, we wanted our story of parents who climb to be judged on just three intersected and inseparable principles, and we used different techniques to try to ensure effectiveness.

First, we wanted to make a *substantive contribution* to understandings of the impact of children/parenting on serious leisure time and climbing identity, and to theories of gendered parenting. We also wanted to make a contribution to methodology in the outdoors by showing how the use of fictional techniques may – perhaps paradoxically – better represent the complex reality of lived experience. The data that informed our story were generated by detailed interviews with couples and individuals and substantial periods of time spent with these families. The story was constructed to be as true to a 'typical weekend' for our participants as was possible and was written with a level of detail sufficient for the reader to live through the weekend and use their own experiences (their own stories) to determine some explanation – or theory – for the events shown. While we did engage what we thought was a fitting theory framework to give our own explanation, we were careful to keep this separate from the main story – interjected as a clear change of discursive tone and direction – so that it could be ignored or tweaked as the reader wished. Similarly, our story was also set in the middle of a more

familiar academic structure of an explanatory abstract and contextualising prologue and epilogue, which allowed us to better pronounce our substantive contribution.

To make a substantive contribution, we also needed to engage our second principle for a good creative nonfiction, which was to create a *plausible reality* for climbers and parents, and parents who climb. That is to say, the creative nonfiction writer can only make their contribution to knowledge, theory, and methodology if the reader is able to "viscerally inhabit" (Rinehart, 1998, p204) the world that they present. Plausibility is to be found in empathy, which can be achieved through verisimilitude.

> *Jack turns off the shower tap and emerges through the cloud of steam, vigorously towelling his deep brown hair. He wraps the towel around his waist, lodges a toothbrush into his cheek and walks back to the bedroom. He peeks through the curtains to reveal an unwelcoming dull grey and then riffles through his drawers and wardrobe in search of his thermals, khaki trousers and fleece.*
>
> *"What do you think? Somewhere with bouldering options?" He calls down the stairs. "Maybe Stanage Plantation? Car park at ten?"*
>
> *"Yeah, that's maybe a better idea," comes a delayed response. "It's looking too cold for Sam to be sitting around all day, but the wind is low so we could do some routes first. I'll text Emma."*
>
> *Jack grabs his phone from the bedside table and slumps on the bed. He puffs out his cheeks and with a purposeful, rapid exhale pulls up Mike's number. "Mike will understand," Jack thinks to himself. "Plans change when you have kids. Mike knows that."*

> *He hurriedly texts the new plan and throws down his phone on the pillow and trots downstairs. Sam is on the kitchen floor pulling a train around an unsoundly and illogically designed wooden track while Liz slices sandwiches into neat triangles, wraps them and places them methodically into the lunch-bag. Jack fumbles through various drawers and cupboards and lines-up the day's supplies on the table: gear, rope, harnesses, climbing shoes, chalk bags, finger-tape, first-aid kit, baby wipes, spare nappies, toy cars and picture books. Bouldering mats are already in the car.*
>
> (Clayton and Coates, 2015, p240)

While descriptions of Sam playing with his trains and Liz making a packed lunch may seem inessential, they work in combination with further rich detail-giving to help the reader to imagine and experience the scene and, moreover, remain infinitesimally faithful to lived experience, built as they were on witnessed events while in the homes of research participants. Similarly, the conversations were 'real'; the words were taken from interview responses or naturally occurring talk and either explicitly relayed or paraphrased, or sometimes presented as inner dialogue, as was necessary to maintain both 'truth' and verisimilitude. Using dialogue between two or more characters can enhance action by giving it immediacy, and show the personalities of the characters, as well as delivering *real* thoughts, feelings and utterances.

Third, we wanted our story to be *aesthetically captivating*. This was not only essential if our previous two quality principles were to be achieved, because the content, sentiment, and aesthetics are inseparable, but it is also important that the creative nonfiction writer maintains the values and standing of the genre s/he employs. Story writers want their stories to be heard, to be allowed to breathe, and have some kind of impact on as many people as possible. We were seeking the potential for more public scholarship by creating a 'user-friendly', appealing,

and not boring text that might be picked-up by academics, non-academics, and students alike. To do this, we employed techniques of literary writing. Some of these, like rich detail, captured conversations, and inner dialogue, have already been discussed, but we also tried to employ scene-by-scene writing, metaphor, and observational humour to engage the reader and help them to follow and enjoy the story:

> *Darkness descends over the Nottingham suburb. Jack swings his bike from the road, the beam of his mounted cycle lamp momentarily slicing across the rose bushes and the front of his house before saturating the garage door with an eerie glow. He glides to a near-stop and expertly dismounts and, one hand on the rear of the saddle, pushes his bike through the gate, the back garden and into the shed. The light from the kitchen and upstairs bedroom tumbles across the lawn, providing just enough visibility for Jack to secure the padlock on the shed door and dodge the strewn plastic toys as he makes his way to the house. On entering, he contentedly inhales the roving aroma of tomato, garlic and onion that is escaping the pan on the stove.*
>
> *"Liz? Sam?"*
>
> *"Up here."*
>
> *"Be up in a minute." Jack jangles his keys and drops them to the table where a messy spread of fresh finger-paintings near covers the somewhat congested calendar. Appointments, meetings, work event, Sam's nursery, Sam's play date. Saturday: Sam's friend's birthday party, recently struck through with red pen and 'CHICKENPOX' written boldly underneath.*
>
> *"Good!" Thinks Jack to himself with only a momentary sense of remorse. Sunday: Sam's swimming class, only an hour but slap-bang in the middle of the day! "Out for a climb Saturday then."*

(Clayton and Coates, 2015, p238)

The above excerpt is the opening scene of our story and it served the purposes of introducing one our main actors and his persona, introducing the 'problem' of finding time for climbing in family life, and, perhaps most importantly, immediately involving and hopefully hooking the reader with vivid text (see Caulley, 2008). Like in subsequent scenes, we write in a way that is thick with metaphor that creates richness and litany that helps the story move along at pace. These techniques, we hoped, also set a tone that was simply more convivial and equalising, inviting the reader to relax and enjoy the story for the story's sake.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the idea of creative nonfiction as a methodological alternative in outdoor studies. While there are currently few examples of the practice within the field, we have argued using examples and advices from our own work and other creative nonfiction scholars, that stories can provide a more inclusive, more engaging, and more 'real' account of the complex processes and experiences encountered in the outdoors.

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