

# In FACT

**LEE GUTKIND**

**LEE GUTKIND** is the founder and editor of *Creative Nonfiction*.

## The Age of the Expert

**RECENTLY, I GOT TO** poke fun at my boss in front of a crowd. I took some of his writing and pointed out how incredibly boring his prose was, how he went on and on, pontificating about a variety of subjects, offering ideas and theories in a way that totally went above the head of any reader who wasn't already attuned to his way of thinking. Basically, you might say the problem was this: My boss, Dan Sarewitz—co-author of “Living with the Genie: Essays on Technology and the Quest for Human Mastery” and co-director of the Consortium for Science Policy & Outcomes (CSPO) at Arizona State University, where I am Distinguished Writer in Residence—is a science policy wonk, not a creative writer. So I offered some suggestions about how Dan might tell stories that would illustrate his ideas and, at the same time, engage readers—keep them from falling asleep.

Dan took my presentation in the spirit in which it was given: to make a point about how academics should loosen up and recognize there's another world out there. Then he struck back. He pulled out a copy of my book “Almost Human: Making Robots Think” and focused on a few of my chapters to show what a lightweight I was—how I allowed many important issues to slip by, undeveloped, because I did not think clearly and deeply enough about them. I was so obsessed with narrative and style that I breezed over substance, losing or at least minimizing my ability to make an impact on my readers and perhaps change their perspectives—or so he said.

This was all done in fun, in order to illustrate how academics and writers might learn from one another, as part of a series of lectures and workshops I recently co-coordinated at ASU. Called “Rewriting Your Thinking and Rethinking Your Writing,” the two-hour

sessions were intended for an audience of mostly faculty and post-docs, and attracted as many as 150 attendees per session—not bad for busy people in the middle of the day. In my introduction to the four sessions, I said we were now living in “The Age of the Expert.” The first session introduced ASU faculty members from journalism,

indicative of enthusiastic interest. There were 108 total titles, divided among the subject areas of history, politics, current affairs, science, business, health and religion, and sold to 59 different publishers, among them Knopf, Norton, Penguin and Crown, to name only a few. Ten of those titles received six-figure advances; one, more

which is an academic center and think tank for people who are interested in how science and technology will shape the future and how to prepare for that future now. (I am also a Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication.) CSPO has as members not only policy wonks like Dan, but also scientists, engineers, philosophers from all over the world and, as it happens, writers like me. There are also two journalists—Gregg Zachary and Joel Garreau, formerly of The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, respectively—who have recently become affiliated with CSPO.

One reason I—all of us, really—have been invited to be a part of CSPO is because as a writer, editor, teacher and, most importantly, a nonfiction storyteller, I can help colleagues realize the mission I have been discussing here: to understand that they have plenty to say, not only to their colleagues, but to the world at large, and that one way (I would argue, the best way) to accomplish this effectively is through the use of nonfiction storytelling.

I see what is happening at CSPO as representative of an invigorated and growing frontier in creative nonfiction. The creative nonfiction movement, which started in the mid-1990s with the widespread introduction and success of the MFA (and now the Ph.D.) in creative nonfiction (and, not coincidentally, the establishment of Creative Nonfiction), has been gaining momentum rapidly. The anchoring elements of the genre, essentially writing in narrative or scenes, using all available literary techniques, are extending beyond the boundaries of English departments and creative writing programs and into other areas of academia, from science and public health to journalism and law. This is not necessarily new as a movement: There have been many scientists and physicians, among others, who have written narratives, but there are certainly more of them now than ever, as the literary agent we had as a guest for that session illustrated.

Something I find especially interesting about this new surge in creative nonfiction

If creative writers are willing to reach past their coming-of-age memoirs and the types of personal narratives that tend to predominate in creative writing workshops, they can turn themselves into experts through research and study, and produce narratives that teach readers about science or architecture or medicine or . . . anything, really.

biosciences and the law school who had successfully communicated (and published) their research through creative nonfiction writing.

Another session featured a literary agent who discussed the importance and popularity of nonfiction narrative in the publishing world. To support his argument, he had made a survey of nonfiction (mostly narrative) book proposals sold during 2010. The survey was anecdotal; the agent had basically analyzed announcements in the online “Publisher’s Lunch,” which is hardly inclusive, but the results were surprisingly

than \$500,000. Obviously, there were many other lucrative deals that were not announced and not included in the survey, but it was clear that if academics and scholars could learn to transform their research into compelling and accessible stories using creative nonfiction techniques, there would be a very motivated trade press market anxious to publish their work. The agent left no doubt that “the age of the expert” was upon us, especially if the expert could master narrative.

I helped conceive and organize these sessions as part of my work at CSPO,

is that many books being published today about “brainy” subjects are not written by “real” experts—that is, by actual scientists or researchers. If creative nonfiction writers are willing to reach past their coming-of-age memoirs and the types of personal narratives that tend to predominate in creative writing workshops in English departments, they can turn themselves into experts through research and study, and produce narratives that teach readers about science or architecture or medicine or . . . anything, really. This can be a great way for writers to make a significant impact—not to mention a fair living wage.

I’ve learned this from experience. I knew very little about science, medicine or technology before I began a book about organ transplantation. I took on that project because I discovered that the world’s pioneer liver transplant surgeon, Thomas E. Starzl, had arrived in disgrace at the University of Pittsburgh, where I was then teaching. His previous medical center had asked him, none too politely, to leave because too many of his patients had died. He came to Pitt, where he eventually perfected his technique and made organ transplantation a lifesaving and relatively safe procedure. Because of his dedication and brilliance, he is responsible for saving thousands of lives.

I saw a dramatic and potentially historic story come my way in Pittsburgh, and I followed it, knowing that my readers would respond to science, if there was a dramatic narrative, featuring compelling and controversial characters, surrounding it. And they did: Two decades later, “Many Sleepless Nights” remains in print, in many languages.

Another nonscientist who has done extraordinarily well recently is one of my former students, Rebecca Skloot, whose book, “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” has been on the bestseller lists for more than a year now. While studying and researching her subject, Skloot was a member of Creative Nonfiction’s editorial staff, and “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks” was her MFA manuscript project at

Pitt. She was also my guest in the fourth and final session of “Rewriting Your Thinking and Rethinking Your Writing” at ASU; her book is the perfect example of style and substance—an illustration of what Dan Sarewitz and I were trying to get at in our “face-off” session.

I am not trying to transform poets and fiction writers into either academics or nonfiction writers—nor do I think that English departments and creative writing programs should recruit scientists and wonks. I am only saying that a growing number of intelligent general readers are becoming increasingly aware that there is a lot to learn in this world—from robotics to genomics, to economics and so on—and it seems to me that the people who have such knowledge might consider sharing it, through narrative, with those readers. At the same time, writers who have mastered their craft can make a fair living and an impact on their readers—and the world—by using their narrative skills to tell the stories behind biology, mathematics or other fields.

This year at ASU, I am teaching a course focusing on this idea. Students in the science policy programs offered by CSPO are encouraged to write their theses or dissertations in a creative nonfiction style, and most of my students have completed their own research. Some already have their Ph.D.s, and others are working toward them. My students are quite an eclectic group; among them are two architects, two biologists, an attorney, a community college teacher, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, and a flight attendant working on a Ph.D. and a book about conflict resolution. Most are writing narrative book proposals or book chapters, and they all want their work to reach a larger audience. They don’t want to write only for their own colleagues—and they see that learning creative nonfiction story-telling techniques is a way to embrace a wider audience of readers. The title of the course is the message for the future to young writers: “Turning Research into Real Writing with Creative Nonfiction.” ■

**“A book you’ll never forget!”**

— Carole Browner, University of California

## Craving Earth

Understanding Pica  
The Urge to Eat Clay, Starch,  
Ice and Chalk

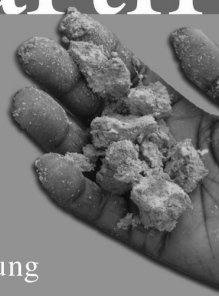
Sera Young

# Craving Earth

Understanding  
Pica

The Urge to Eat  
Clay, Starch,  
Ice & Chalk

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**“Sera Young combines a detective’s intuition, a scholar’s diligence, and her own joyful, indefatigable curiosity to unravel one of the oldest and oddest of human mysteries. I devoured this book like an amylophage on a laundry starch bender.”**

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