If you find yourself, like I did, asking what we need to be thinking about nonfiction as the twenty-first century picks up steam, then you’re liable to run into some problems straight away. Who, for example, are the “we” to whom the basic question refers? Readers, writers, critics, teachers? And that’s just the question’s subject; the meat of the matter lies in its predicate. Yes, the gray feeling of being overwhelmed descends immediately, which led me to hunt for someone on whom I could dump this unwieldy question. Someone who’d have something more interesting and meaningful to offer than the intellectual gobbledygook I might be able to muster on my own. Independent bookstores seemed like a good place to turn.

To run an independent bookstore these days represents nothing less than an act of bravery in the face of numbers that rarely add up to good business sense. More than that, such a pursuit can be nothing less than an act of true love for the printed page and things literary. I figured that these passionate and brave folks could teach me something about nonfiction and what we should be asking ourselves about it merely by the way they choose to organize their stores and by what they put in them. And of course by what they leave out of them.

"Excuse me, miss, would you point me in the direction of the nonfiction?" I asked a clerk at Shaman Drum in Ann Arbor. I see her there so often that I really should know her name. I stop by almost daily to finger the books and far too often end up carrying home a stack of them. She looked like she thought I might be having an off day, but she kindly pointed me to the shelves marked “Literature.” Among the fiction titles I had virtually memorized in their places were the essay, memoir, and literary nonfiction titles I had also grown accustomed to seeing on my regular visits. But wait, I couldn’t find Wole Soyinka’s new memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* or even his earlier one, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. “No, those are in ‘Africa,’” the clerk reassured me, “Always best to ask.” Yes, that’s just what I was thinking. So could you tell me, I wanted to ask, what is the difference between Literature and Africa? While we’re at it, how is memoir by Patricia Hampl more related to things literary, thereby landing it in Literature, while memoir by Soyinka is more closely related to geography, thus relegating it to the Africa section of the store? Both authors are widely respected as literary writers. Surely, Hampl’s *Virgin Time* has more in common with *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, than it does with Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, which sits nearby in the Literature section. Or does it?

Feeling no more secure about my ability to define or say anything meaningful about the genre, I left town. I went in search of my old stomping grounds on the west coast. I found that my favorite used bookstore in Menlo Park had sold its stock to Powell’s in Portland and closed its doors. Kepler’s, also in Menlo Park, was alive again, but not the same store I had grown to love in the decades before it closed last year citing cash-flow problems. While grateful for the reopening, I was sad to learn that the captain at the helm I’d trusted for almost twenty years to fill the shelves with all kinds of good surprises had stepped down in favor of a board with better business sense who promised to reopen the store and keep it open. And even Cody’s on Telegraph Avenue, yes dear and beloved Cody’s, was almost empty of stock and hours away from closing for good, when I stumbled in eager for enlightenment.

Disoriented and feeling awfully glum about what all these re-orgs and closings might say about the future of books in general, never mind this question about nonfiction, I drove across the Bay Bridge and found a parking spot directly in front of City Lights in San Francisco’s impossible-to-find-parking North Beach. Poet and painter Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s place since 1953, City Lights is my kind of place, too. A beacon in what has become a stormy sea of capitalist and consumer forces that do not support things literary in the ways I cherish. “You must have the luck of the Irish,” the man on the sidewalk said as I emerged from my fancy red car, a gift for the summer that had my old Toyota back home feeling mighty jealous. “That spot was just waiting for you.” I took it as a good sign.

With chairs everywhere and a sincere invitation to pull one up and sit for a long, long spell, to read cover to cover, if you have the hankering, books you might otherwise buy, City Lights welcomed me home as it always had. I overcame some of my mounting anxiety. I went upstairs first to check out the poetry, then took a spin around the main floor to get a feel for...
I fled to fiction, where I found John Gardner's novel *Grendel*. Fortunately for us all, this particular bit of fiction led me to reconsider my approach to reading nonfiction, and I have been delving into the genre with renewed interest.

In these dialogs, intentional or otherwise, across time and with time and between writers and works, I hoped to find trends and patterns, clues and signals, and various and sundry significant tidbits that would scream, "Here's what we need to know about contemporary nonfiction!" Surely these conversations would tell me something meaningful. I worried only slightly that, just as surely, I had left the most important and obvious books still sitting on the shelves. Armed with the sense, however, that I was at least reading good books, ones with the City Lights seal of approval, I left the store to head home to stage what promised to be a dinner party conversation of epic proportion.

I read until closing time and amassed an armload of books and a summer reading list that meant I was not likely to get around to Pound and Blake until the fall after all. I was struck by what might be revealed in the apparent conscious and inadvertent conversations between texts, and I was inspired to invite many of these books home to sit with me at the dinner table for a good long chat. Ann Patchett's *Truth & Beauty*, a biography of her friendship with Lucy Grealy, and Grealy's own *Autobiography of a Face* landed in the shopping bag. Then, because the book of poems by Nick Flynn called *Blind Huber* had captured my attention last spring, and everyone and their uncle has raved about his memoir, I picked up *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, which made me think I should take another look at Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, even though it's technically fiction. I couldn't leave Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* on the shelf either because I'm a huge fan of her early work, and poet David Roderick had told me that she actually got her hands dirty in this new book, got up close and personal with emotion-in-your-face. And finally, a Benjamin Kunkel essay in the *July 16 New York Times Book Review* meant that I couldn't leave Thoreau out of the conversation. Kunkel locates contemporary memoirs in the Romantic tradition dating back to Wordsworth "who discovered the self could provide a 'heroic argument.'" By this [Wordsworth] meant that the theme of an individual's growth could claim all the dignity and movement traditionally accorded battles in heaven or on earth." And Thoreau's *Walden* wins Kunkel's vote for "the best and most Romantic memoir an American has produced—though nobody calls it one." Lucky for me John Daniel had so perfectly crafted his experiment in solitude to be, in part, a conversation with Thoreau, and so I picked up Daniel's *Rogue River Journal* and made a note to dig out my copy of the classic *Walden*.

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I came down with a serious case of hostess jitters when I contemplated the dinner party I had planned: the big questions, the incompatible guests, and the genre itself. What, after all, could I possibly say about a genre for which categorization is a matter of opinion, a genre that only feels cozy and welcoming as a category if properly presented by someone I trust, and even then only cozy if I turn a blind eye to all the aforementioned inconsistencies I found in other trusted and not-so-trusted places, only cozy if I turn an even blinder eye to the dreck that seems to sell like hotcakes if someone says it makes for good beach reading and includes a celebrity or two among the assembled cast. Armed with the sense, however, that I was at least reading good books, ones with the City Lights seal of approval, I left the store to head home to stage what promised to be a dinner party conversation of epic proportion.

The monsters that had been piling up in my closet since I first began thinking about this essay were waiting for me on the curb. Luck can be fleeting. And I am not so brave as the booksellers I have been praising, who, when they design their stores and compile their book lists have the chutzpah to make the call about what we should read and how we might encounter it. No, even with my big pile of books and the bit of inspiration and insight I had begun to uncover at City Lights, I still could not bring myself to pick up a stake to put in the ground.

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straight back to the topic at hand. I didn’t expect to find it where I did, but Gardner handed me the key. In *Grendel*, Gardner retells the story of Beowulf from the perspective of its monster. Monsters and I, as you now know, have been spending a lot of time together, and I couldn’t help but feel that developing some insight about the great-great-granddaddy of monsters might prove helpful, perhaps even comforting. But I never expected to hit the mother lode. Gardner didn’t just give us the monster’s perspective. He gave us the monster. This reads like straight-up memoir, if ever there could be such a thing. Moreover, on page seventy-two of my copy, the dragon in conversation with our “autobiographer” patiently gives Grendel the key to his existence, and the dragon gave me the key I felt I needed to dig into this discussion.

The dragon tipped up his great tusks, stretched his neck, sighed fire. “Ah, Grendel!” he said. He seemed that instant almost to rise to pity. “You improve them, my boy! Can’t you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment—that’s what you make them recognize, embrace!”

Eureka! I said to myself. Let’s talk about monsters and how they drive contemporary literary nonfiction, how they are the brute existents of the genre. Grealy had her cancer and its aftermath; Patchett had a complex friend and a friendship cut short; Flynn had suicide, homelessness, and drug addition, all in the family; Didion lost her husband (and daughter) unexpectedly; and Daniel had the specter of middle age looming large and the need for reconciliation with the past to make peace with a commitment to the future. Pain, suffering, grief, confusion, depression, addiction, angst, and anguish. Monsters, monsters everywhere! What can they tell us?

Disseminated through e-mail on July 3, 2006, by American Public Media as part of “The Writer’s Almanac,” and widely quoted thereafter on personal blogs and websites is the following quotation from Franz Kafka’s January 27, 1904, letter to Oskar Pollak:

> We need the books that affect us like disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.

A quick survey of contemporary memoir published in the United States seems to support this need. From the current examples, more than the cancer itself, Grealy’s exploration of her sense of shame and a “crippling lack of self-esteem” are the monsters that propel her quest for a beautiful face to replace the one she lost to cancer at age nine. And she doesn’t merely relate the details of her experience; she invites readers into her suffering and keeps us there with statements throughout the book like the following passages, the first relatively early in the book:

> . . . so when the next injection came, the next bout of crying, and I wasn’t able to not suffer I felt I had only myself to blame, felt that I had failed in some unknowable spiritual way. In my mind I didn’t have what it took: I didn’t deserve to be comforted.

And toward the book’s end:

> Lying in my usual abject heap on the living-room carpet, a pose I often adopted in dire times, I mouthed the words ‘I’m tired. I don’t want to do this anymore.’ For once, I didn’t adopt either a noble or a catastrophic interpretation of events.

The tone of these statements does not say, “Pity me,” but rather “Suffer with me. You have felt this lonely, too, even if the details of our circumstances differ.” Grealy ends the book with a more hopeful tone that might be construed as an effort to spare the reader the weight of suffering alongside the author through a difficult life. She does so by ending with a moment of implied self-esteem: “. . . I looked with curiosity at the window behind him, its night-silvered glass reflecting the entire café, to see if I could, now, recognize myself.” Grealy confronts the reflection of the physical self she has avoided for more than a year. She ends on a note of bravery.

Less than ten years after the book’s publication, however, Grealy was dead at thirty-nine of largely unknown causes, though nonlethal levels of heroin were found in her system, and she had made several suicide attempts in the years prior to her death. Her good friend Ann Patchett surmises in the afterward to the 2003 edition that although Grealy did not die of cancer, “there is a sense in which that disease and its aftermath were a large part of what killed her.” Patchett continues in the afterward and then in her memoir about their friendship to make the case that Grealy died because she felt she was alone.
Lucy tried constantly to find and fully participate in any joy that was available to her, but still she was pulled into scorching bouts of depression. Her grief about feeling ugly and her desire to be loved in a way that would be huge enough to meet her needs would regularly roll her into a little ball and paralyze her. She would cry for hours and then for days. Lucy’s sadness terrified me, in large part because it made such perfect sense.

In these two books, the suffering on the page is laid bare so acutely that, particularly when read together, they cause me to question Kafka’s assertion that we need such an axe. Not that I’m a fan of the avoidance of emotion, but I wonder whether using nonfiction to stimulate us in this way—to share misery and suffering—is putting the genre to its best use. And I wonder whether it’s the best use of one’s literary talent to write nonfiction this way.

Phillip Lopate, in his keynote address to the 2005 Nonfiction Now conference, later published in The Iowa Review, said that nonfiction has an “organizing principle . . . certainly true for the essay . . . [but also true] for nonfiction in general [that can be] summarized as: tracking the consciousness of the author.” For Lopate, “consciousness plus style equals good nonfiction.” By this criterion, it could readily be argued, and it has been argued elsewhere, that Grealy and Patchett have written good nonfiction. But I’m not sure that a trip through a consciousness, even if done well, is enough, unless that consciousness is particularly unique, and although I can think of quite a few that are, they are the exception, not the rule. I’m not alone in my doubts.

Kunkel in his New York Times Book Review essay “Misery Loves a Memoir” criticizes contemporary memoirists who “have taught us mostly how to survive. They haven’t begun to teach us how to live.” He precedes his criticism with the question, “But where is the contemporary writer reporting honestly, ambitiously and without therapeutic cant or smug self-help recipes on his or her effort to live a proud and decent life?” Literary facility can result in competent and even beautiful sentences with which to relate one’s story in all its painful detail, but beautiful sentences alone and a story well told might not be enough to ask of nonfiction in the twenty-first century. This is a time when we just may need more vision and less re-vision, less self-help for deeds long done and more looking forward.

The dragon in Gardner’s novel maintains that Grendel improves the people he terrorizes; he stimulates them. Our monsters, our demons and misfortunes, our “brute existents” may shape and define us, but surely we have some say about how we respond to them and what we choose to do with them. Recognizing and embracing our limitations need not be the end point. While Grealy and Patchett’s books trigger empathy, I am not excited, or perhaps more importantly, I am not inspired enough by the misery-loves-company concept I find in these books to appreciate them fully. These books help me understand and explain loss, but that only carries me so far. A reason to get out of bed in the morning, to carry on, to break new ground—these are the kinds of things nonfiction might offer us in what several friends and I have begun to refer to as “an obvious era of decline and fall not unlike Rome in the fourth century.” That’s why I find—for very different reasons—some hope for contemporary memoir in Flynn’s Another Bullshit Night in Suck City and Daniel’s Rogue River Journal.

Although Flynn is not timid about dragging us through the mud along with him as he confronts his mother’s suicide, his father’s life of alcoholism and homelessness, and his own life of addiction and struggle, Flynn wrenches narrative and language in fascinating ways that add the dimension of vision to the book. In a chapter called “same again,” Flynn uses the form of a Kato Indian Genesis myth to juxtapose the literal and figurative voices in his head. The resulting cacophony created by the language and with the language puts readers inside Flynn’s head, rather than merely making us privy to his thoughts about what’s inside it. The chapter begins:


The chapter continues and ends the way it started, and though most of the book is written using more conventional
narrative techniques, Flynn experiments with ways of telling his story that include scripts, illustrations, letters, and journal entries. These formal choices are not merely strung together as collage; rather, the material dictates the form in ways that provide the reader with a multifaceted perspective not commonly found in memoir. Exploding linear narrative teaches me to see differently. The way Flynn tells the story creates an aesthetic and artistic merit that moves me beyond the details of the story itself toward a contemplation of his experience and lived experience generally that transcends the details of the lives he chronicles. I am offered the possibility of new vision.

Daniel succeeds in moving beyond the details of his narrative in a different, but equally successful way. He does so by means of premise. He sets up an experiment and takes as his departure point Thoreau's Walden. Daniel tells us early on that he envisions a project with "less ambitious" aims than those of Thoreau. Daniel does not plan to "live a manifesto" but rather to "see what a long, unbroken stretch of solitude is like and to write a book." As the book unfolds, however, we learn that his goals are more ambitious than we have been led to believe. Daniel works throughout the book to discover or uncover a conscious path into an adult life, a life that includes, but is not limited to, the rest of his own. Although his journey and ours with him provide us with some insight into how Daniel came to be his adult self, the book's achievement is that Daniel illuminates a path that others might also follow, a way to finish living the past so that we can live the present into the future.

In his "experiment in solitude," Daniel retreats from society to spend the winter alone in a cabin in the Oregon wilderness, where he explores his complex relationship with his long deceased father, Franz Daniel, a labor organizer important particularly in the 1930s and 40s and by all accounts a big personality. Daniel sets up his experiment in this fashion not only to understand how he landed where he found himself at the midpoint of his life, but also to understand how he might grow up to fully inhabit the remainder of his life. In translating the experience into a book, Daniel helps us to imagine how we might also choose a conscious path for our own lives. The way he defines his line of inquiry, gleans meaning from the experience, and translates the experiment into prose are what inspire me. Almost at the end of his four-month stay in the Klamath mountains, Daniel writes:

Can a writer write his way to self-knowledge? Probably not. Yeats said man can embody the truth, in the completion of his life, but he cannot know it. Yet one can, I think, write his way to a clearer, broader seeing of his life, just as a climber sees more when he has reached the top of his climb, whether that be fifty or ten thousand feet from his start. I don't know myself any better today than I did four months ago, but I see my life a little better and feel it better—I felt my way back into it, I belong to it a little more surely than I did.

Although a subtler axe, I find here an approach that begins to access that frozen sea in ways that present possibility rather than mere explication or raw feeling.

In both these books, the authors paint a picture beyond their own lives that adds weight to their respective explorations. Flynn portrays homelessness in a way that is far more compelling and insightful than what most journalists and investigative reporters have provided. Daniel, in exploring his father's life, chronicles twentieth-century labor issues and movements in ways that shed light on contemporary issues of employment, power, and capitalism. In short, these two books do what Joan Didion has always done so masterfully. They explore the personal by placing it in a far broader context so that each can be used to illuminate the other. As readers, we learn about the self in context and by implication can begin to envision alternatives for how we might better contextualize our own selves. We are not asked to gain insight through empathy but to look beyond the self, even while focusing on it, and to see possibility in this more broadly defined scope. Possibility we can use.

I'll come clean now. My dinner party was messy and contentious and at moments devoted to the level of a food fight. I'm still reeling from weighty questions and incompatible guests, but I'll play nice for Two Truths and a Lie. I'll do my best to leave you with the short and sweet of it all. As with Grendel, I'll slay the monsters and come to a clear, if untidy end. No, I do not know all there is to know about nonfiction and memoir or even all that we should be asking ourselves about it, but I decided I would have to claim what I thought and just start writing the essay you have before you. Yes, I have a new kitten, a little monster named Zilla—who despite my recent run-ins with monsters galore is not named for the popular sci-fi colossus that emerged in Japanese iconography as a stand-in for the atomic bomb. Rather, she is named for a fierce and courageous woman who is featured in another of Daniel's books, one called Looking After, and who taught me some things about what is possible in life when I was lucky enough to meet her near the end of hers. And as for whether or not nonfiction is true, well, that all depends. But yes, I will allow that much truth can be, and certainly is, found in nonfiction—even the nonfiction that is fiction—but I will also dare to put a stake in the ground and say that the truth that interests and inspires me, the truth that I believe we as writers should strive for and we as readers, critics, and teachers should require is the kind of truth that not only illuminates the facts and feelings before us, the facts and feelings that make us who we are, but the kind of truth that shines a light down the path we might travel, the path that leads us toward possibility, toward who we will be. Yes, I look for a kind of truth in nonfiction that asks us to be more than we thought we could be and helps us to figure out how.
Thank you to Judy Avery, Senior Librarian at the University of Michigan, for tracking down the source of the quotation by Franz Kafka and an extra special thank you to the Owen family, especially Becky, for providing a wonderful retreat this summer in which to formulate this essay. I dedicate this essay to independent booksellers—champions of the very best books and creators of spaces in which we can discover them.

WORKS CITED


The Monsters Everywhere trope as used in popular culture. In normal stories, heroes often encounter enemies. They may be found guarding some important … Monsters everywhere, hiding in the trees Just behind the rocks, blowing in the breeze Monsters everywhere, doing as they please They try. To. Scare.