**Fiction or non-fiction: Does it matter anymore?**

Russell Smith

The Globe and Mail; Published Wednesday, Feb. 01 2012, 3:46 PM EST

The biggest topic in literature these days – aside from the endless e-book debate – is, once again, the difference between fiction and non-fiction.

We dissected this issue in 2006, after James Frey’s bestselling memoir of addiction turned out to be untrue. At the time, many people – particularly artists – argued that there was no reason to dismiss a powerful narrative simply because it was labelled non-fiction. They thought we would have enjoyed it just as much if we had known we were reading a novel.

The Frey incident actually caused a backlash, I think, against journalistic accuracy among creative writers. It is so cool to say now that story is all and truth is irrelevant. I have heard of a university teacher of “non-fiction” encouraging students to make stuff up in their memoirs. (The fact that memoir-writing is now a common graduate-level university course is also evidence of the rise of this issue.)

Now, the focus of the discussion has turned the other way, not to things that claim to be true, but to things that claim to be art. A manifesto about the irrelevance of conventional fiction made something of a stir when it was published in 2010: *Reality Hunger*, by American author David Shields, argued for a contemporary style of narrative that would involve mixing sources, original and not, real and imaginary. Pure fiction, Shields argues, is boring, because it is not “real” enough.

French author Michel Houellebecq no doubt pleased Shields when he was caught inserting a passage from Wikipedia verbatim into a novel. Houellebecq gave a respectably Shieldian answer to the charges: Stealing and rearranging passages was perfectly okay if it was for “artistic purposes.”

And there are increasingly frequent controversies about romans à clef, in the age of confessional, blog-style fiction: Tell-all memoirs about other people’s love lives, dressed up as “novels” – are these to be given the respect that genuinely inventive art does, or are they just venal vehicles for libel? A book review in The Globe and Mail last week addressed a recent one of these. A U.S. novel called *You Deserve Nothing* by Alexander Maksik caused a scandal when it came out because the author described a real affair he had with one of his students and called it fiction. There were sections written in the student’s voice, which struck some of her friends as unkind.

This is, to me, a complete philosophical non-issue – of course, fiction has always worked (and offended people) in this way, has always been inspired by reality, stolen voices, twisted them. Nothing unusual here.

The Globe’s reviewer, Stacey Madden, a novelist himself, pointed out, quite truthfully, that “for many fiction writers, life and art are indistinguishable.” But then he went on to dismiss any distinction between fiction and non-fiction. “It matters little how a work is categorized,” he wrote.

This fashionable view is convincing, paradoxically, only as long as we restrict our conversation to works that label themselves fiction. Yes, of course, any kind of interaction with other genres is welcome in the domain of creative art. I want David Shields to write any kind of collage-pastiche-encyclopedia-entry novel he wants – who could have a moral objection to artistic experimentation? It is significant that Shields, Houellebecq and Maksik all call themselves fiction writers despite their proud pillaging of the real.

But in the everyday world of pseudo-journalistic non-fiction publishing, where memoirists vie for media attention with ever-more-alarming personal stories, the view that there is no such thing as truth is dangerous. What was offensive about Frey’s claim of truth was that it was not an artistic ploy but a marketing one. He knew that the average person would not, in fact, react to his story with awe and compassion if they thought it was a novel. In fact, they wouldn’t even read it, because the average person doesn’t read novels. The people of America wanted a person, not a story, a real person whom they could see interviewed on Oprah. His lie was exploitative.

It is much more brave to exploit the lives of others and admit that one’s representations are distorting, imaginary, true and not true – to bravely lie and admit to lying; that is fiction, like all art, a pure and noble lie. To invent personal suffering to garner celebrity for oneself as a person is not so noble, and not, I think, what contemporary intellectuals want to praise when they promote their genre-bending new values.

Reading Questions:   
1. Define fiction and nonfiction as you read.   
2. Determine the denotation and connotation of each word. (Look up denotation and/or connotation if you don't know them already or well enough to respond)  
3. Is lying more or less tolerable when done in the name of art? Think very carefully about this question. If you are still confused, google "James Frey A Million Little Pieces Controversy." This will give you more clarity in terms of what the writer is arguing.