



***The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre:***  
*An Anthology of Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*  
Edited by Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins  
Michigan State University Press, 2014  
155 pages  
\$22.95

Reviewed by Melissa Kiefer

My high-school students groan when they hear the word *essay*. They slump in their chairs and put their heads down on their desks. They seem intuitively to understand Ander Monson’s observation in *Essay as a Hack*: “I fear for the essay, friends, and its bad reputation. It feels white and dull, dusty, old.” Writers, in short, need to realize that creative nonfiction is not a static genre; it does not have to be standardized, traditional, or dull. We needed a groundbreaking book to remind us of the essay’s experimental features and to revive us for the opportunities of the genre. *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* fits the bill. Part craft book, part anthology, and part good advice, it features as its contributors the rebels, the rule-breakers teetering on the edges and testing the boundaries of our fourth genre, an exciting genre that can encompass all of the other genres, too.

*The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* gives writers permission to spice up the essay. Play with words, form, time, and scope. Make the essay gritty. Make it sultry. Make it illuminate. Educate but complicate. Allow it to question itself. Let the essay tease, sidetrack, and interrupt. Each essay in the volume tackles specific challenges curious nonfiction writers must face in moving forward. Some writers wonder about whether time should be measured in minutes or moments. Others try to distinguish among facts, blurred memories, and plain pretending. Still others try to negotiate the varieties of truth—for example, objective truth versus emotional truth.

In “Eternal Sunshine of the Nonfiction Mind: A New Philosophy for Understanding Truth and Creative Nonfiction,” Sean Prentiss writes, “...CNF is the art of crafting shifting memories.” In “Night,” in the context of a father’s death, Joe Wilkins writes about how and why memories shift between childhood and adulthood. “The boy needs a story,” he writes. “As does the man who was the boy. For it is in the weaving of a story that the boy begins to understand.” Writing connects us not only to others, but also to our past selves, making creative nonfiction truly the genre of human experience. In “The Art and Absence of Reflection: What is the Why?,” Kim Barnes reminds writers always to remember the audience: “Readers of your nonfiction should come away knowing more about themselves than they do about you.”

The scope of imagination in creative nonfiction is demonstrated in “Lines that Create Motion” by Robin Hemley. In pondering a stranger’s scrapbook, Hemley discovers that in order to tell the most authentic story, he must take the risk of going beyond the sepia-toned pictures and reinterpret or translate a new significance to the stranger’s life. Judith Kitchen takes a similar approach in “Gone A-Sailing: A Voyage to the Edge of Nonfiction.” When she (also looking at a scrapbook) allows herself to color her mother’s life and go outside the frame of the black and white photos with the cliché captions, she ends up finding a bigger truth, a stronger connection, and a more authentic version of her mother’s life.

## Book Reviews

Some contributions match form to function especially well. Lia Purpura ironically writes her essay as an advice column. The first letter begins, “Why do some men wear such tight pants, and why are they getting tighter these days?” In speaking cleverly and subtly about the human body, she creatively teaches us about the essay’s body.

Some of my favorite essays (both in this book and in other anthologies) are ones that I do not completely understand. Nancer Ballard observes in “Time in Narrative Nonfiction” that the writer may have to settle for a reader learning something as opposed to completely understanding something, and that’s okay. Maybe learning is what we should actually hope for. Learning is complex. A story may be over, but the insight, the wrestling, and the learning have just begun.

*The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* is sure to make writers stretch their techniques, experiment with styles, reinvent their writer identities, and reach for new possibilities. In fact, it constitutes perfect required reading for serious writers brave enough to push their boundaries. As it very much proves, the essay is not dead. In fact, the essay is more exhilarating and alive than ever before.