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The Blurred Line: Nonfiction Fictionalized

Rob Kunik

I dedicate a large amount of time to choice reading in my classroom. I'm teaching by the philosophy that students must first love to read. Far too often, teachers guide students' reading selections by period or genre. We force the opinion of what is good literature on the student. Then, when the student spurns the teacher's selection, we collectively wonder why the student doesn't read. Could it be that the students, not enjoying what they have been sold as good, immediately lose faith in their ability to enjoy literature? Instead of concentrating on time periods or genre lines, educators should offer students choice. This choice, given freely and without restraint, allows students to move in their own directions. This direction, I find, isn't defined by fiction or nonfiction. The direction my students love to go is nonfiction fictionalized, or should I say fiction nonfictionalized?

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the story of a young woman's journey through mental breakdown—journey, fiction or nonfiction? Many people call the book semi-autobiographical. That is just another category. In her Smith College journals, Plath says, "And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise" (83). Susanna Kaysen's book, *Girl, Interrupted*, forces us to ask what is real. "'There's a great, long literary tradition of being off your rocker,' Kaysen says. 'People think I'm a psychology expert, but I'm not. I'm a writer'" (Sachs 60). Once again the lines blur be-

tween what is real and what is not.

I'm aware that Sylvia Plath is an obvious example. There are others. Many of my past and current students are reading Tim O'Brien. O'Brien said in a *New York Times* review of his novel *In the Lake of the Woods* that he went to Vietnam even though he was opposed to the war. He went because he felt if he did not go, he would lose the love of those he loved (Barlow 35). In O'Brien's book of Vietnam short stories, *The Things They Carried*, a character finds himself in a boat on the Rainy River. On one side, Minnesota and the draft board's call to Vietnam; on the other, Canada.

And what was so sad I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. Silly and hopeless. It was no longer a possibility. Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. The old image as myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation, as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silver waves. Chunks of my history flashed by. I saw a seven-year-old boy in a white cowboy hat

and a Lone Ranger mask and a pair of holstered six-shooters; I saw a sixteen-year-old Little League shortstop pivoting to turn a double play. I saw a sixteen-year-old kid decked out for his first prom, looking spiffy in a white tux and black bow tie, his hair cut short and flat, his shoes freshly polished. My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be. . . I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister. . . . All my aunts and uncles were there . . . and my grandfather. . . they were all whooping and chanting and urging me towards one shore or the other. I saw faces from my distant past and my distant future. My wife was there. My unborn daughter waved at me, and my two sons hopped up and down. . . . (57-59)

A student reading this book, unaware of the genre, would swear it was O'Brien's own testimony, as many of mine do. I, to this day, would say this is too real to be fiction. Then O'Brien himself would set me straight. "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (179).

"The Honest Ones Would Frighten You"

At the end of her book, *A Night Without Armor*, Jewel says, "I wrote you those nice poems only because the honest ones would frighten you" (116). Many of my students now believe writers such as Plath, Kaysen, and O'Brien water down their realities so as not to scare us—or themselves.

The nonfiction evolving into fiction point has been made. Still, how can the fiction becoming nonfiction line be blurred? Impossible? No. Fictional characters abound that spawn nonfiction

reading. Looney Tunes has inspired books by or about Mel Blanc, Fritz Freling, and Chuck Jones.

The greatest example of fiction evolving into nonfiction comes from many of my reluctant readers who have become, I hope not for a short time, avid readers. Lately, the trend also has spilled over to the Hemingway crowd. The struggling reluctant readers find gratification in the fact that their reading choices are confirmed by many bestseller lists. Of course, we're talking about *The Rock*, and *Mankind*, two professional wrestlers turned best-selling authors (with help from Joe Layden), who come from the admittedly fictionalized World Wrestling Federation.

I was introduced to *Mankind*, known to his parents as Mick Foley, and his book, *Have A Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, by an enthusiastic student between classes. He told me he had read the 500 plus pages (big print) in two nights as he shook the book at me. The student regaled me with *Mankind's* option between tearing off his ear or choking to death. His head was caught between two twisted ring ropes. Usually, the ropes contain slack, which allows *Mankind* to pull his head out with only slight effort. However, *Mankind* was unaware that a wrestler from the previous match had requested that the ropes be tightened so he could properly slingshot himself across the ring. "Mr. Kunik, you have to read this! It's really pretty good. Even my mom enjoyed it!" This referral came from a student who is currently choosing among West Point, Notre Dame, and Stanford.

The Rock Says. . . , Dwayne Johnson's book, actually quotes Shakespeare on the second page: "Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them," from *Twelfth Night*. Right below is a quote from Willie Nelson: "I have never gone so wrong as for telling lies to you. What you've seen is what I've been. There is nothing I can hide from you. You see me better than I can." William Shakespeare and Willie Nelson? I don't see the connection. I've tried reading portions of the book but couldn't find any merit in it. However, one student did. He recently gave me his senior picture. The

back said, "I don't know how you did it, but you did. I finally like to read and I owe it all to you." I guess the book does have merit after all. For the uninitiated, the World Wrestling Federation is sports entertainment, a carefully crafted and manipulated entity where champions rise and fall, and strong personalities reign supreme. In essence, we have a fictional world producing nonfiction books that primarily talk about fiction. Can you see the lines blurring?

Nonfiction turning into fiction, fiction turning into nonfiction . . . do teachers really need to point in any direction? Isn't the fact that students are reading what they feel is a good book enough? Haven't we learned that the more a student reads the better off they are on any test? Won't their growing love of reading lead them to their particular interest, be it fiction or nonfiction?

Finally, I believe we should all be brave enough to reflect on Daniel Pennac's book *Better Than Life* when asking how we should teach.

Erect no wall of prior knowledge around books. Ask not a single question. Do not assign the smallest scrap of homework. Do not add a single word to the pages that have been read. No value judgments, no vocabulary explanations, no textual analysis, no biographical notes. It is strictly forbidden to talk around the book. Reading is a gift. Read, and wait. Curiosity can't be forced. It must be awakened. Read, and trust the eyes that open slowly, the faces that light up, the questions that will begin to form and give way to other questions. (51)

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About the Author

Rob Kunik, a frequent conference presenter, teaches English at Houghton Lake High School.