

Susan Lohafer

"Between Story and Essay: Micro-Markers of Storyness"

I am a genre theorist who has spent a career looking for the unique features of the short story as a reading experience. At the same time, I have taught courses in a graduate writing program in literary nonfiction, where students frequently asked me, "Is it okay to invent dialogue? Can I change the way things happened?" For me, the relationship between the imaginary and the verifiable—that is, between the traditional genres of fiction and nonfiction—is most frequently and interestingly played out on the borders between the short story and the artful essay, and in the minds of readers caught between them.

These days, we view genres as cultural constructions, an evolving negotiation among historical precedent, editorial judgment (the same text might be called a story by one editor, an essay by another), publishing convenience, and, most vaguely but importantly, the tacit contract between writer and reader. Given proper notice to the audience, the experimental essay is as free to offer subjective viewpoint or gamesmanship with the reader as any avant garde fiction. Conversely, experimental stories sometimes emulate core forms of nonfiction, like the catalogue. Where fiction and nonfiction approach each other under the banner of literary art, they have learned to dress in each other's clothes, mimic each other's trademarks, and raid each other's territory. And yet . . .

We cling to the labels, perhaps nowhere more obviously, in my country, than in the annual series of Best American Short Stories and Best American Essays. Because of their convenience, their de facto role as literary arbiters, these volumes are a useful resource for anyone curious about the mutations and constancies of genre. I have long been interested in the global markers that trigger the perception of whole-storyness. Briefly, a few years ago, I looked for micro-markers of genre discernible within a single sentence, if that sentence is in the salient position of opening or closing the text. Of course, to say that the referent of a given sentence is fictional or nonfictional is frequently impossible. "Genre," on the level of a sentence, is a projection, a hint or tendency, a judgment that the words sound like the opening or closing of a story, or of an essay. And yet . . .

What underlies that perception of "sounds like"? I asked 45 students to read a scrambled list of first and last sentences from the selections in four volumes: Best American Short Stories from 1991 and 2001, and Best American Essays from the same years, to give myself examples chosen by someone else, and to have the option of comparing texts from different decades. For an essay published in 2008, I reviewed the accuracy-rate for genre-prediction, derived micro-markers of fiction and nonfiction from the sentences most often correctly linked to the genre of their source, and brought these findings to bear on the interpretation of a particular short story.

For my presentation in Wuerzburg, I would like to return to this area of genre study. Drawing upon the same body of empirical evidence, this time with the notion of liminality in mind, I would like to consider not only the contested area between fiction and nonfiction, but also the unarticulated models of storyness and essayness that readers tap into when asked to make distinctions in genre, even with the sketchiest of evidence. Finally, and for the first time, I would like to consider the infiltrated space between quantitative data and subjective interpretation where I practice my own highly unscientific version of literary empiricism, in the interests of short fiction theory. As before, I will spend at least half my time illustrating the relevance of my findings 1) to an understanding of the short story as a genre, and 2) to the interpretation and appreciation of one specific short story.