

# Chapter 12. Creative Nonfiction

## Accents the National Day on Writing

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Alec Baldwin wants to make sure he pronounces my name correctly. We're standing beside a stage on the top floor ballroom of the Mandarin Oriental on Columbus Circle in New York City, for a truncated dress rehearsal of the Norman Mailer Gala presentations, October 4, 2012. Baldwin is the master of ceremonies, and I'm presenting \$5,000 checks to high school, college, and two-year college winners of creative nonfiction contests I've organized for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Baldwin is shorter and slimmer than I expected him to be, more *Hunt for Red October* than *30 Rock*, and he's taking all his responsibilities very seriously. I'm nervous as hell. This is the fourth time I've presented at this event, but I still feel an imposter among the star power assembled.

A few minutes earlier I'd met Mohammed Ali. A small group of prize winners and presenters had been ushered into a small side room where Mr. Ali was seated in the middle of a couch, wearing sunglasses and looking remarkably frail, sitting silently and absolutely still, his Parkinson's entering its final phases. A photographer quickly posed us while Ali's wife looked on, and then, as quickly, we were ushered out. I introduced a red bow-tied Garrison Keillor, who was there to give a fiction writing prize, to North Carolina high school English teacher Kay McSpadden. Keillor was intrigued by the title of her winning story, "Why Women Moan in Bed," and further humored that her husband was a Presbyterian minister. Joyce Carol Oates received an award.

The previous year's Gala event had been perhaps even more surreal. In the reception space outside the Mandarin Oriental ballroom, I apologetically backed into Tony Bennett, who was there to see Keith Richards get a Distinguished Biography award from Bill Clinton, for his recently published memoir, *Life*. I stood at the podium ten feet from Richards at a front table, his gray hair shocked up with a bright red headband, wearing tinted glasses, a loose dark suit with an unbuttoned white shirt, and a long silk scarf around his neck, hanging to his waist. It was unnerving. Also receiving awards that night were Elie Wiesel, Arundhati Roy, and Gay Talese. Roy provided a tense moment during her acceptance speech, when she took time to chastise Wiesel for Israel's policies with Palestinians; the Israeli ambassador to the U.N., Ron Prosor, was in the audience. The highlight of the evening was Clinton telling how Richards had graciously come to visit his family and signed a copy of his book for Hilary's mother, Dorothy Rodham, long a Stones fan. The former president reported her telling him, "I always did like

those bad boys,” a comment that got huge laughter. For his part, Richards played around. Holding up his award medallion, he observed that he was in a room full of famous writers and joked that he didn’t see what was so hard about writing books, “You hacks.” But then he turned serious and acknowledged the crucial effort of his co-author, James Fox, whom he then invited to speak.

When I gave the first NCTE Mailer Writing Awards, hosted by current and former *New Yorker* editors David Remnik and Tina Brown on October 20, 2009, Toni Morrison was the most luminous celebrity, but she wasn’t alone. The room was filled with “glittery literati,” as the *New York Times* reported the next day (Cohen). Oliver Stone. Salman Rushdie. Annie Lebovitz. John Waters. Ken Brown. Joan Didion. Jhumpa Lahiri. Don DeLillo. Doris Kearns Goodwin was the final speaker. Calvin Trillin was the master of ceremonies, and while he didn’t ask how to pronounce my name, he did make a crack about Colfax Avenue in Denver, which he noted *Playboy* magazine had called “the wickedest street in America.” As much as Denverites want that story to be true, it isn’t. I replied with something flustered about Kansas City, Trillin’s home town.

I’m gushing. I’ll beg your pardon and explain why an English professor was handing big checks to students at celebrity dinners where plates started at \$2,500. Then I’ll explain what all of this signified at an historical moment for the NCTE, when the organization reached what I judge its apogee in celebrating everyday writing across America. For about a decade, starting around 2005, NCTE was seeking to expand public understanding of writing and its teaching. In addition to sponsor research and pedagogy for English teachers, the Council more overtly entered the realm of advocacy, opening a Washington, DC, office to influence policymakers and interact with other disciplinary organizations. With the help of a Ball Foundation grant, executive director Kent Williamson created the National Center for Literacy Education, coordinating two dozen other organizations, mathematicians to social scientists. NCTE sought to shape wider public perceptions of writing, including not only as something done for school and work but also in public and private lives, for a range of personal and interpersonal reasons. *Writing in the 21st Century*, an NCTE report written by Kathi Yancey, provided the intellectual framework for public efforts that found their apogee in the Mailer writing awards and the National Day on Writing.

The first Mailer gala was held on the first National Day on Writing, organized by the NCTE, and the event capped a nationwide series of events all centered on gathering and celebrating writing by “plain Americans” from all walks of life, plumbers to police, nurses to students, in lofty but also, especially, workaday/everyday genres: notes, social media posts, journals, documents. The National Day on Writing was born in an 800-word proposal that Kent Williamson brought to the NCTE executive committee in August 2008, as agenda item 22 of its summer meeting. Kent explained having been contacted by a staff member from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, who wondered if there was such a thing as a national writing day. The answer was no, but the idea generated interest among some NCTE

leaders and staff, enough that Kent roughed out a few thoughts. President Kathi Yancey put it on the agenda for formal consideration, and the executive committee approved the concept and asked for preliminary planning.

With an initial desire to have a national day devoted to writing occurring as early as late January 2009, time was rather of the essence. Kathi and Kent put together a committee consisting of Sharon Floyd, Jennifer Ochoa, Kathi, Kent, and me, with NCTE staff including Barbara Cambridge, Millie Davis, Mark Rowe, Sharon Roth, and Mila Fuller. Charged to bring a recommendation to the executive committee by September 1, we had our first phone call on August 19, which I took from a Denver kitchen in shambles from remodeling. The group brimmed with ideas that quickly organized around two poles. One cluster was the day itself, which would feature having people write, of course, but also other activities: advocacy, celebrations, and the like. The other cluster concerned possible activities leading up to the day itself.

In his early proposal, Kent speculated that “the Council could reach out through its membership to invite not just teachers and educators, but all whom they touch (including students, parents, and other community members) to post their writing through the NCTE website to a national log or archive.” He mused further that we might “mine the [resulting] database of collected writings to draw instructive lessons for policymakers during the 2010 Advocacy Month, and may well use the project as the rallying point for our first policy symposium or press conference in DC . . . cultivating grassroots support for future legislation or public initiatives that NCTE may choose to sponsor on 21st century literacies or writing” (Williamson, National Writing Day). Our committee embraced this general idea. One line of conversation focused on whether to have a theme for all this writing or simply make an open call. The other line focused on logistics and frameworks. I suggested that rather than an archive or database of writings, we might use the language of a National Gallery of Writing, replete with halls, wings, and salons. Maybe we could have different people open and curate different parts of the gallery, their main job being to encourage submissions and provide some minimal screening.

We ended that first meeting by agreeing each to do quick writing, which Kent gathered and circulated before a second meeting (Williamson, “Agenda”). During that second conversation, we settled on recommendations to the executive committee that included creating a National Gallery of Writing. We also, not trivially, settled on The National Day on Writing—not “of.” The choice struck many as clunky, but our reasoning was that we didn’t want to imply people should write that day only; in fact, one emerging interest was in bringing to the national consciousness how thoroughly writing pervaded all daily life, every day. The preposition “on” was to signify that this day would call attention to writing, that writing would be its feature and focus. People very well might write that day, but we wanted people on that day to think *about* writing. Years later, I’m not sure our subtlety was worth the effort.

By the time Kathi Yancey delivered her president's remarks at the November NCTE convention, much of the framework was established, as was the day's purpose. Kathi explained:

This project affirms individual writers at the same time that it creates a major resource showcasing writing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . [It] places the knowledge of NCTE members at the heart of a very dynamic, large-scale enterprise. Second, it allows us to serve a much wider public while also gaining recognition as a community that has much of value to offer society (and needs to be supported!). And finally, it has the potential to “de-mystify” writing for those who don't think of themselves as writers while subtly making the point that writing is a skill that no segment of society can do without. (NCTE, “Minutes” 6)

With the help of Verizon and other partners, NCTE created [www.galleryof-writing.org](http://www.galleryof-writing.org),<sup>1</sup> an ambitious portal for gathering and displaying writing, and began building the national infrastructure to gather submissions. A brochure published in spring 2009 explained “three types of display spaces.” One was the Gallery of the National Council of Teachers of English, “a broad mosaic of writing” hosted by the Council. A second was the Gallery of National Partners, several spots hosted by the many corporate and educational partners who joined the enterprise, from Verizon to the National Writing Project. Third, and most capaciously, was the Gallery of Local Partners. Any group could apply for a salon in this last gallery, the brochure inviting families, classes, schools, churches, clubs, workplaces, cities, or whatever. For example, I formed a Colorado Gallery of Writing, which I explained in an op-ed for *The Denver Post*, published October 17, 2009, inviting all Coloradans to send their writing. As you can see, NCTE's impetus was radical openness and inclusivity. In fact, a key point of the National Day on Writing was to make visible and celebrate writing in all facets of life, from the grand to the mundane. We wanted everyone to recognize themselves as writers. Kent asked me to write a few invitational words for the launch brochure and the website, and I embraced the vision in, a little pretentiously, the voice of Walt Whitman.

Let's imagine America writing.

Let's imagine essayists and auditors, poets and nurses, tweeters and technicians, blogging beauticians, church bulletin scribes, advocates and analysts, authoring.

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1. This website no longer exists nor, sadly, as I'll explain below, do any of its contents. All the writing gathered in the gallery seems lost—or the dozens of hours I spent plumb-ing the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine simply illustrate my ineptitude. In any case, NCTE has no files.

Let's imagine memoirs and memos, rants and remembrances, oral histories, letters to the future, postcards from the past, profiles profane and sacred, instructions, directions, reflections, re-torts, factual and fancied.

Let's imagine a living American gallery of writing checked with salons, fitted by school or site, by genre or by identity, but most importantly by you, salons in which a homeless man's story hangs next to the finance major's wedding vows.

Let's imagine school kids linked to college students, teachers to professors, and all to city halls, shelters, board rooms, all linked by writing.

Let's gather writers who'd never thought themselves that: mothers, bus drivers, fathers, and veterans. Let's have sharings, coffees, contests silly and celebratory, so that the national gallery of writing has myriad outposts, local and physical. Let's open our writing centers to our communities.

Let's imagine October 20 and all this embodied in a National Day on Writing, a day when we cut the digital rope on our Gallery, when the Norman Mailer Writers Colony gives creative nonfiction awards to high school and college writers in a gala ceremony sponsored by famed New York writers, students whose work has been supported and selected by NCTE members. Actually, that day is planned. What's needed to make it happen is you. Please help.

After a complex series of emails, October 20 emerged as the celebratory day itself, with a strong factor being the Mailer/NCTE Writing Awards, the logistics of that star-studded day creating a very narrow window. While the day had been set by early spring 2009, it received extra imprimatur on October 8 in [Senate Resolution 310](#), sponsored by Robert Casey (D-PA), which declared October 20, 2010 as the National Day on Writing and called on "educational institutions, businesses, community and civic associations, and other organizations to promote awareness of the National Day on Writing and celebrate the writing of their members through individual submissions to the National Gallery of Writing." Barbara Cambridge, in NCTE's Washington office, was fundamental to this effort. Several of us around the country garnered similar resolutions. My colleague Geoffrey Bateman persuaded Governor Bill Ritter to establish October 20 the National Day of Writing in Colorado, his staffer drafting the proclamation making known their preposition preference.

The day itself was a whirlwind. NCTE had set up the day's activities in studio space at the New York Institute of Technology, at Columbus Circle in New York

City. At 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, Kathi Yancey and I were live, doing a webcast on college writing. With naive faith in America's airlines, I flew into LaGuardia earlier that afternoon and barely had time to check into a hotel on 57<sup>th</sup> Street and walk over to NYIT. Kathi and I talked about current developments in college writing. Prior to our hour-long session, numerous NCTE luminaries were live, including Cathy Fleischer and Linda Adler-Kassner, Lucy Calkins, Carol Jago, Ernest Morrell, Marilyn Valentino, and Bonnie Sunstein, who share a video, "What is a Writer." Interspersed throughout the day, which ran ET 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., hosts shared postings from the National Gallery of Writing. But a few outsiders spoke, too. The featured presenter at 11:00 a.m. was listed as "Presidential candidate Obama on the importance of writing (10 minutes)" (Williamson, "just to give you").

After the broadcast, I went back to my hotel, changed into a tux, and walked a mile south to Cipriani, on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, location of the Mailer Gala. Cipriani was an impressive space with marble columns, inlaid floors, lofty arches, and dramatic lighting, designed for the kind of ostentatious impression befitting the building's origins as the Bowery Savings Bank and well repurposed for lending grandeur to events. I was barely in the door when the evening's architect, Larry Schiller, introduced Bonnie Sunstein, Susan Reece, and me to William Kennedy and Toni Morrison. Morrison told us she'd once been an NCTE member.

Schiller was the effusive broker of the Mailer-NCTE connection. When I first met him on the phone, I took him as an energetic impresario whose torrential stock of anecdotes must have been exaggerations at best. I knew he'd been a close friend of Norman Mailer, who'd made Schiller his literary executor, but really, those Forrest Gumpish stories and those exuberant plans? I confess I was proven utterly wrong. He did, in fact, photograph Marilyn Monroe and publish a famous book of pictures, *Marilyn and Me*. He really did direct seven movies and miniseries, winning five Emmys, including for *The Executioner's Song*, based on Mailer's book on which he collaborated. He really did collaborate with OJ Simpson during and after his trial to co-author a book presenting Simpson's views. He really did write a book about JonBonet Ramsey, *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town*, then was executive producer of a television movie based on it. Clearly, in working with Schiller, I was traveling miles above my small-town Iowa apogee as Sky Master-son in *Guys and Dolls* and president of the high school science club. Schiller made me dizzy.

Several months after Norman Mailer died, in November 2007, Schiller had approached Kent Williamson with an idea to sponsor student writing contests, both to encourage young writers (he told me of how important a contest had been to him in his formative years) and to perpetuate Mailer's legacy. He had a lot of money and ideas, but he didn't have the network or wherewithal to organize a national contest. He perceived that NCTE, with its longstanding student writing awards series, would be a good partner. Kent invited me to join a few other members in an exploratory conversation with Larry. Afterwards, I told Kent that



I saw considerable advantages to a partnership, which would connect members and students to what seemed a high-profile literary crowd. However, I cautioned him that Mailer's reputation among NCTE members was complicated at best. After all, Mailer had cultivated an alpha-male persona of tough machismo that was ripe for critique and conflicted with some values held by teachers, especially at the college level, even if Mailer's progressive bona fides were solid. I thought the advantages outweighed the risks, but I wanted the NCTE leaders to understand Mailer's problematic reputation. I also noted that he was a writer few high school students or teachers were reading and that, when Mailer was assigned in college, it was generally a few essays or excerpts from books like *Executioner's Song*, as examples of technique. I found (and still find) him an important journalist and nonfictionist, even if I also share some of the dismay for his persona.

In the end, NCTE and Schiller agreed to collaborate, and in an NCTE executive committee vote on January 31, 2009, I was asked to organize the contest. I selected a small group that included longstanding members Bonnie Sunstein and Susan Reese. I figured that the world didn't need another fiction or poetry contest, and it surely didn't need students submitting traditional academic papers. I suggested to Schiller that creative nonfiction would be a meaningful focus for student writers, who could send everything from memoirs and personal essays to literary journalism, and that this umbrella would also recognize Mailer's significant contributions in the genre. Larry agreed. Working with Kent and with the deputy executive director of NCTE, Mila Fuller, who with Marcia Loeschen would manage the day-to-day logistics of the contest, I drafted contest guidelines and a call for submissions that was printed in brochure and featured in NCTE communications. From it, Schiller developed advertisements he placed in the *New York Review of Books*, *Publishers Weekly*, and elsewhere.

We considered various judging approaches, including ones that would screen at the high school, district, and/or state levels, providing filters before works would enter the national pool. In the end, we settled on the most open process possible: high school students would submit directly to the contest, with no supervision or oversight beyond providing information through which we could contact teachers and parents, the former for recognition, the latter for permissions. College students were free to certify their work as their own and to give (or withhold) permissions to publish. Submissions were online, students uploading files that were converted to pdfs. We wanted to welcome and trust students, especially seeking writing not done as part of any class. We also wanted to avoid bureaucracy, especially for teachers. While I lobbied for this approach, I'll confess that it scared me. What if we got 10,000 submissions? After all, the whole judging system I developed depended on a multi-step process. A large group of readers at the first round would each read 30–50 pieces, sending a fraction to a second round. No rubrics or elaborate systems. Simply identify the five works you thought best. Teams of second-round readers chose pieces to send to a third round, who would choose finalists and honorable mentions. The finalists would be judged by prominent writers invited by Schiller.

(That first year, those judges were Ted Conover, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Anne Fadiman, Barbara Lounsberry, Lee Gutkin, and Melissa Fay Green.) While I was confident we could identify 100 first-round judges, I was less certain we could find twice that number if we were deluged by entries. Fortunately (or not, depending on how you look at it), that year had about 800 high school submissions and about 350 college submissions, which I allocated to various layers of judges, sending five finalists to the marquee final judges.

The high school winner that year was Laura Swanagin, a senior at the Alabama School for the Arts, who wrote a moving, braided personal essay, “Luna,” in eight segments, each headed with a fact about the moon—for example, “The Orbiting Period,” “Impact Craters,” and “Maria (lunar planes) and terrae (highlands)”—that introduced poetically laconic images of a family undergoing divorce. As someone who’d read Swanagin’s brilliant piece, I remember that night at the Cipriani dinner table, Emily sitting amidst all that glamour with her two parents, together celebrating a daughter for a poetic piece focused on the family’s dissolution. It was a poignant moment, knowing this seventeen-year-old had written lines like, “Maybe my father will stop crying, and maybe my mother will fall in love.”

The college winner was John Gilmore, a student at Utah State, who not only received a check for \$10,000 and publication of his entry, “Final Cascade,” in *Creative Nonfiction* 39, but also a paid residency at the Norman Mailer Writers Colony. Schiller and his colleagues enjoyed—and slightly fretted about—the fact that the winner shared a last name with Gary Gilmore, the subject of *Executioner’s Song*, confessing that they’d carefully researched any connections (there were none). I sat at a table with Gilmore and his wife, Maryssa, who was studying mortuary science.

As much as I’d like to offer pages of profoundly engaging student writing, space and the complexity of permissions allow me to give but the smallest flavor. As you read them, I hope you’ll appreciate both what students chose to share about their lives and the importance of providing them open opportunities to write about whatever experiences they saw fit. Here, for example, is the title of one high school student submission: “Things about My Parents I Forgot to Tell the Woman Who is Deciding Custody of My Brother, Sister, and Me.”

Here’s another student, from a piece about eighth grade:

We were learning about parts of speech in English class when we got a new seating chart. I was placed by Brad, who always had everything he wanted and wrote in shiny black mechanical pencils.

He snickered at me, one day. “You know that nobody really likes you?” He said it as if I was stupid for not ever knowing.

Again, I couldn’t speak.



“Circle the verbs in the sentence!” the teacher instructed. I look at my paper, eyes blurring.

Likes is a verb. And so is hate.

A high school student from an immigrant family:

When I hear things like, “Look—girls your age are getting married and soon it will be your turn,” those comments are like rockets landing in my ears. I find a place to be alone and think to myself, “All this hard work, these top grades, these compliments, for what? For me to remember when I’m seasoning the soup.”

A college student writing about a relative:

In the kitchen he was already prepared. Two paper plates, a bottle of ketchup, a jar of mustard, one bun, one fork, one knife. Uncle Steve turned on the microwave and pulled out a pack of Hebrew Nationals.

Uncle Steve was a belated victim of the Vietnam War, an unwitting agent of Agent Orange. He had newspaper clipping and a handful of medals detailed his service framed atop the fire mantle. He would die in the Long Beach Veterans Hospital at age 54, as it would turn out. He would go in for shoulder surgery and forget to retrace his steps.

A high school with an exuberant sense of style and pacing:

My hometown is made of break walls surrounding a harbor where young children jump off and a man who once gave me an eagle feather got drunk and floated out on a mattress to the middle of the harbor at three in the morning and was torn through with the hull of a speed boat driven by a man whose daughter was my best friend and the owner of the bar. They’d chatted that night, the killed man and the killer, and the killer told the killed man to leave his bar because he was closing down for the night and the killed man had had too much Jack Daniels to stay. That boat came up in between that man’s legs, and all he had left was that wife, those kids, and that eagle feather.

Over the years, Schiller convinced us to add a creative nonfiction contest for two-year college students and a fiction contest for high school teachers. Separately, he created a college poetry contest, and with his encouragement, the British edition of *GQ* magazine created a fiction contest for British students. That winner flew over for the gala.

The NCTE Mailer awards were last given in 2016, after a blazing seven years, their demise coming through a combination of circumstances. I'm partly speculating, because I stepped down as coordinator in 2014, when I was elected vice president of NCTE, but I watched several factors firsthand. By 2015, the annual gala had fairly much run its course; always an expensive undertaking to maintain its high profile, the event relied on substantial underwriting and the continued willingness of high-profile attendees to write big checks to support a top-tier (and expensive) event, with lots of concomitant travel costs for the student winners. Schiller contacted me, as program chair for the 2015 NCTE convention in Minneapolis, to see if we could make the student awards there, in a plenary session for which he could supply a big-name writer as part of the draw. That was impossible, for various reasons, though I was able to offer two options at the convention, neither of which appealed to him. In the end, he arranged a more modest event (at least by his high standards) at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn on December 10, 2015, where Salman Rushdie was the featured honoree, Gay Talese made opening remarks, Billy Collins introduced teachers who won fiction awards, and the executive director of NCTE, Emily Kirkpatrick, gave the student prizes. In related conversations during 2015, Larry wondered if renaming the awards after more currently popular writers would bring greater attention, sharing some names that I agreed would have more cache than Mailer's. There was a contest again in 2016, with winners chosen, but there was no awards dinner, and in January 2017, Schiller asked to suspend everything for a year. They never restarted. The last sustained conversation I had with Larry was in spring 2017, after he invited me to a May 2 gala preview of an exhibit of 77 photographs he curated for John F. Kennedy's Centennial, at the American Art Museum (Gangitano).

NCTE has continued other writing contests, including the longstanding Achievement Awards in Writing for high school juniors. Students submit two pieces: themed writing and best writing. The 2022 theme included this line from H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*—"I hope, or I could not live"—followed by this prompt:

Pessimism is an easy habit to form but not a healthy one to maintain. With hope as your guide, look forward and imagine a better future.

Your task will be to do one of the following:

Create a piece that paints a picture of a hopeful future.

OR

Identify a global, national, or local problem that affects you or others you care about but that you feel hopeful you could change somehow. Describe the problem and offer a solution.

In contrast to the structured parameters of the "themed" component, illustrated in the prompt I've just quoted, the "best writing" contest is open. Students

are told, “You may produce any genre, or kind, of writing (e.g., personal essay, graphic novel, news article, love letter, eulogy, oral history, photo essay, scientific report, letter to a politician, local petition, speech).” Students are encouraged to submit writing done outside of school assignments, though the call for submissions hopes that teachers might find the awards useful for teaching. This openness is somewhat tempered by the requirement that teachers screen submissions at the school level before they enter the national competition, with schools able to advance only one entry per five hundred students. Across the country in 2021, there were but 284 nominees, out of some 24,000 American high schools, and from these, 136 students (from 26 states) received Certificates of Superior Writing. No doubt a pandemic and strange mixes of remote learning had some effect on the seemingly low numbers.

What genres did students submit? How much creative nonfiction? The contest site for 2022 offered examples from three award-winning students from 2020, and of the six pieces, three are poems, one is a novel excerpt, and two are personal essays. In one of them, student Pedro Juan Orduz explains:

In tenth grade, we read *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. I didn’t particularly care for the book, but the assignment we got for it was a personal literary essay. I had never written a personal essay before, so the format intrigued me; in fact, I had never really sat down and written about myself before—not in the context of long-form prose . . . I thought deeply about what stories to share and what stories not to, about what really affected my life and what was just a funny or tragic anecdote, about what was an actual reason for my behavior and what was my mind making up excuses to avoid self-examination. Even though it was not my best assignment that year, it’s the one I remember most, and the one that had the greatest formative impact.

Orduz reflects on the valuable opportunity to write about his own life in the tradition of the personal essay, a genre unfamiliar to him, and I suspect to others. High school and college writing teachers would do valuable work in helping students understand and write such pieces, as I suggested in a primer to high school teachers (Hesse, “Imagining”). I served as one of the judges for 2022, reading work from nine impressive students, each of whom submitted at least two works, some of them three or four. By far, the genre most frequently represented was poetry (thirteen of twenty-six pieces), with fiction (six) and creative nonfiction (five) a distant second and third. Only two of the submissions were traditional “school” essays.

As for the National Day on Writing, it continues, at least as I’m writing in 2022, though the character is quite different, muted and truncated, a shadow of its founding aspirations. Probably such transitions are inevitable, as initial energies become unsustainable. Taking over a broadcasting studio for an entire day

of programming, with updates to and from the field, isn't very realistic. Still, even without the high-profile actions of the founding years, it was possible to sustain some form of the national gallery of writing, a serious effort to gather and curate the range of writings that "common" Americans were producing as part of their daily lives, both everyday/workaday writings and creative works, both fiction and nonfiction, that they chose to pursue out of interest, not obligation.

Instead, around 2016, NCTE shifted the focus of the day to celebrity authorship and to social media. NCTE hired "author and social media thought leader C.C. Chapman" to host podcasts featuring writers and celebrities, along with a new website, [whyiwrite.us](http://whyiwrite.us), which seems to have been deployed last in 2019 (Froman). Celebrity writers were obviously present at the Mailer writing awards, as my opening illustrates, but the student writers were accorded equal space on the program, and their works stood alongside the more famous authors'. In the early years of the National Day on Writing, "the people's writings" were paramount in the national gallery, representing a range of purposes and genres, whatever people chose to submit through open calls. In later years, the invitation to write remained but the visibly sanctioned subject matter and genre had dwindled to declaring "why I write" and tweets, or tweet-length postings. The October 25, 2017, issue of INBOX precisely documented 93,956 tweets (about 40% of them original). A message "recap" included images from classrooms and pointed to a "Writer's Story Campaign" with a dozen short YouTube videos. The 2018 INBOX newsletter report celebrated a "national write-in with Jacqueline Woodson," and noted 49,129 tweets using #WhyIWrite, with 19,747 of them original (NCTE, "INBOX"). That newsletter featured four images, two from school classrooms and two from authors Clive Cussler and Jose Antonio Vargas, along with a link to another 137 Twitter screen captures. America's day on writing is now marked primarily by participation counts.

Perhaps such analytics are the only way we really know how to mark or represent the day, such is the power of quantitative representation. In fact, we could go a level deeper and count how many total words were generated, or how many phonemes. We could run everything through corpus linguistics software, calculating word frequencies. Perhaps we could report vowels and consonants. Apologizing for my sarcasm, I understand the rhetorical necessity, if you're a sponsoring organization, to have some quick way to represent a campaign announced as national, and numbers provide it. Reports on the first National Day on Writing certainly include numbers. But the main feature was the gallery of language artifacts collected and displayed. I suppose someone could report on a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago or the Tate by commenting on the total number of works they contained, or the number per salon, or the number of blue-dominant versus white-dominant, and such a report could provide helpful information, but we'd likely find a solely numerical report unsatisfying in conveying the nature of the place. Better would be describing *in situ* the Chagall windows or Whistler's "Symphony in White, No. 2," but evoking a gallery's spirit by describing its contents

poses the challenge of time and scale: How many paintings do I need to describe to give some reasonable rendering? A gallery has countless functions; curating cultural works, allowing people to see them, and providing audiences for makers are three of them.

NCTE's National Gallery of Writing was most important, I think, because it invited "common" people to share a piece of writing true to them, regardless of genre, purpose, or merit, knowing that others could view that submission, in juxtaposition with others perhaps very different. My favorite museum in Denver—the Kirkland—has fine paintings and sculptures, certainly, but also a Model 30 Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner and a 1909 electric water kettle. The National Day and the Gallery celebrated writing as making, period, in all its manifestations. And while there's no denying the motivational and consequential effects of knowing 50,000 others are participating in a day on writing, the individual consciousness and attention are significant, too. The website of London's Tate museums provides a "Guide to Slow Looking," and perhaps a better way to celebrate the National Day on Writing would be to look at writing others have shared, to browse but linger on some few. Alas, the Gallery has disappeared into the Great Byte Beyond.

These days, NDoW happens in two spaces: Twitter and individual classrooms or writing centers. During the pandemic, the latter activities were largely virtual. In October 2021, NCTE retweeted a few dozen events from schools around the country, from individual classrooms to university libraries and writing centers to a two-week national environmental writing camp to a small consortium of northeastern college writing centers. NCTE's 2021 advice for preparing the day consisted of four bullet-pointed activities teachers might assign their students, along with a reminder to share the hashtag #WhyIWrite.

#WhyIWrite has become the non-school space of NDoW, taking on a life of its own, in some ways standing for the NDoW, primarily through a lively hashtagged exchange, with NCTE explaining that "Since 2009, the hashtag #WhyIWrite has encouraged thousands of people to lift their voices to the things that matter most to them" (Fink). That hashtag was a minor element in 2009, but since then it emerged pretty much as the brand. "National Day on Writing" has a copyright notation, perhaps because the day's origins in NCTE have gotten diffuse, and the Council wants credit for a good achievement. I've had conversations with teachers who assumed that the Day was created by the National Writing Project or thought nothing about its origins at all. Much of NCTE's effort to expand wide consciousness about writing in all manifestations, including as a self-sponsored personal and creative activity among 21st century literacies, has faded. Copyrighting a designation is a blunt way to assert commitment to broad public writing. Organizations change, obviously and naturally, and in the late 2010s, NCTE shifted its energies to reading and literature, with the effect of rendering itself less visible and central as a broader sponsor of writing, though it may shift yet again.

In 2019, a separate website, [whyiwrite.us](http://whyiwrite.us), included a fill-in-the-blank template, complete with a choice of color schemes, from which respondents could create a badge to then share on social media:

EVERYONE is invited to declare and share their #WhyIWrite perspective with a new digital social badge. The #WhyIWrite social badges will help to illustrate the multifaceted ways in which writing is a part of our lives via a single phrase—"I am a (job title/ position) and I write to (what/how writing supports who they are and what they do)." Download your badge and post to your own social media to help amplify the #WhyIWrite message to an even wider audience. Help us demonstrate, especially to students, the many ways and reasons writing drives how we live and work every day. Imagine how powerful this tapestry of examples will be. Create your badge today! (NCTE, "Welcome")

I appreciate the gesture toward the program's roots in recognizing the everyday writing of Americans, including in their work. It recalled Kathi Yancey's 2008 hope to "de-mystify writing for those who don't think of themselves as writers" (NCTE, "Minutes" 6). But instead of asking people to share their writing, it asked them to share *about* their writing, with the motivation, moreover, of getting a metaphorical gold star to put on metaphorical lockers and Trapper Keepers. And while I value reflection, respect motivation, and acknowledge declarations as a genre, the enterprise was artificial in ways the 2009 effort skirted. The imperative then was primarily to gather "found" writing, making visible the kinds of things people already had at hand, part of the natural course of being. It didn't preclude writing something new or special, but the spirit was to celebrate writing as it was happening, in all its guises, rather than to gather templated answers to a prompt.

I hope we might re-embrace the effort to push against writing as something that authors or professionals do, something that schools oblige of students, or that amateur creators do in poems or fiction, as the usual arty stuff by arty types. The Mailer celebrations put students alongside celebrated authors, as podium equals (if, obviously, not publicity equals.) The National Gallery of Writing (even the name was intentional) invited everyone to present themselves as a writer. Certainly, the effort to elevate the ubiquity of writers and writing has political value for organizations like NCTE; demonstrating writing's pervasiveness implies the importance of a professional organization devoted to its sponsorship, study, and teaching. And, certainly, a renewed effort to invite, curate, and celebrate writing has scholarly value for analyzing and representing vast varieties of written artifacts. But it also has the invitational value of recognition and respect, a democratizing aspiration, with NCTE valuing makers and making.

If the Day on Writing prized the everyday—the writing that happens spontaneously in going about life—the NCTE Mailer creative nonfiction contests privileged the polished: writing crafted intentionally by an artisan. It was striking that,



among all the available genres of creative nonfiction—literary journalism, profile, travel writing, and so on—memoirs and personal essays overwhelmingly dominated submissions through the duration of the contest, and those were the pieces that inevitably won. I remember the most stylistically adroit piece I read during the first year was a deft, complex, new journalistic account of “hell night” at a local restaurant that annually hosted a ghost-peppered, Carolina-reapered menu designed to mete spicy pain on masochistic diners. The piece went forward as one of five finalists but didn’t win.

More common—and judged more successful—were pieces that were less journalistic and more self-referential. I’ve explained elsewhere that creative nonfiction exists on an axis of self-full to self-less. Self-full pieces make the author’s experiences central; they thoroughly foreground what the writer did and thought. Think memoirs or personal essays. Self-less pieces contain little to none of that, focusing instead on event or idea, keeping the author in the background, less as agent than as voice, though surely and keenly as voice (think literary journalism). The NCTE Mailer awards overwhelmingly drew self-full pieces, nearly all of it earnest, some of it immature or formulaic (“and the lesson I learned from this experience was”), but much of it well-wrought. Of course, it could be that memoir and personal essays were what students knew and were assigned. But it could also be that these genres are what they liked to read and wanted to write. The NCTE invitations gave them license and opportunity to put their lives at the middle of things. The message of the National Day on Writing was that all writing and writers mattered and ought to be gathered and preserved. The message of the NCTE Mailer Creative Nonfiction Contest was that writing about the world as you see it—especially as you lived it—was worth doing with attention and care.

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The second-to-last ceremony I attended for the NCTE Mailer Student Awards in Creative Nonfiction was in 2013 at the New York Public Library. There was a usual fine crowd, and I had my picture taken with John Waters. The night’s most interesting moment came while I was standing backstage with the student winners. Beside us in a wheelchair was Maya Angelou, who was receiving the night’s biggest award. As we waited, author Samuel Delany was giving a lengthy introduction of Junot Diaz, who was getting a medallion. Suddenly, Angelou loudly shouted, “Boring.” Her attendant/companion stage-whispered, “Dr. Angelou, you shouldn’t say that,” to which she said, perhaps even more loudly, “I don’t care; he’s boring!” I turned to the high school winner standing beside me and said, “Well, there’s something you don’t see every day.”

My last event was in 2014, the awards having long been decoupled from the National Day on Writing. For the first time, I wasn’t a presenter, instead sitting in a back corner with the high school nonfiction winner and his family. At the table beside us was Monica Lewinsky, attending as a guest of *Vanity Fair*. It turns out

Lewinsky had been friends with Norman Mailer in Provincetown, and shortly after that evening, *Vanity Fair*, for whom she's been a contributing editor since then, published her short piece about that friendship. I wondered if the high school writer sitting next to me knew anything about Lewinsky beyond her being yet another probably famous person in the room. I wondered if he'd write about that evening and what story he'd tell if he did. I wondered whether he'd keep writing essays at all or if this would become a one-time experience that happened years ago, perhaps remembered as a fond aberration in a writerly life that turned elsewhere, including away from writing.

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