

## Stan Persky / "I DON'T WRITE NON-ANYTHING": ON SO-CALLED CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Thinking about the difficulty of defining writing genres, Edmonton-based author Myrna Kostash recalls Dorothy Parker's snarling quip: "I don't write non-anything." So much, then, for the cumbersome notion of "non-fiction." A moment's thought ought to be sufficient to understand that defining a body of writing that might stretch from Plato to, say, Terry Glavin's *A Death Feast in Dimlahamid* (New Star 1990), in contradistinction to novels and short stories ("fiction"), or even "literature," seems like a bizarre and sloppy taxonomy.

As for the administrative use of the term "creative" with respect to writing departments or courses at high schools, colleges and universities, most real writers I've known have always regarded such usage with muffled guffaws. Nor is the word saved by appending it to something other than "non-fiction" (my friend Susan Crean has occasionally field-tested "creative documentary," with mixed results). And pull-eaze, spare us the prefixing of "new" to any genre term (as in "New Journalism," "New Narrative," etc.) except as the most temporary patch on a flat tire until we can get to the nearest service station.

So, call it what you will (Kostash favours "literary journalism;" I find myself digressively remembering that some editor dubbed some of Albert Camus' writings about living in Algeria "lyrical essays," a phrase that rather caught my fancy). I'll content myself with a behavioural description: here are some writings by Myrna Kostash, Ven Begamudré, Merrily Weisbord, and Robin Blaser that meet the (only relevant) criterion of being sufficiently interesting as writing about the world, in a way that, say, a prime ministerial press release (a sterling example of "creative non-fiction") doesn't.

Myrna Kostash has written about ethnic life (*All of Baba's Children*, Hurtig 1977), left-wing politics (*Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada*, Lorimer 1980), and teenage females (*No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls*, M & S 1987). As Max Bell Professor of Journalism at the University of Regina, she's given

much thought and patience to describing this kind of writing, and in particular, in distinguishing it from "straight" journalism. The succinct version (in a January 1990 letter to the Writers' Union of Canada newsletter) goes like this: "... moving in from the margins of 'pure journalism' on the one side and 'pure literature' on the other to introduce at the centre of creative writing the idea that non-fiction/journalism is a literary genre." Inspired, in part, by the work of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, she's currently working on a manuscript about Eastern and Central Europe, from which this selection is taken.

Ven Begamudré, who lives in Regina, was born in South India, and is the author of a novella, *Sacrifices* (Porcupine's Quill 1986), and a short story collection, *A Planet of Eccentrics* (Oolichan 1990). This selection is from a manuscript with the working title *Load Shedding* ("an Indian term for conserving electricity through scheduled blackouts," he explains). In Begamudré's hands, load shedding "becomes a metaphor for surviving cross-cultural and intergenerational conflicts, and it suggests the idiom 'shedding personal baggage'."

On her most recent visit to the West Coast in late 1990, Montreal-based writer Merrily Weisbord was working as a consultant to an aboriginal woman filmmaker, and the year before, she scripted a documentary film, *Songololo*, about South African cultural developments. Both of those chores seem exemplary of one of the reasons that Kostash cites (in a recent lecture) for the appearance of the kind of writing presented here: "the pressure from the previously-excluded or the dissidents of our culture to be heard (ethnic minorities, women, nationalists, gays, hippies): their first task is to document *who* they are, *where* they come from, and *how* it feels." Weisbord, author of *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Lester & Orpen Dennys 1983), is currently working on the subject of women and sexuality, which is reflected in the selection that appears here.

Vancouver poet Robin Blaser, professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University, is included here, with mischief aforethought, to show that the most unpopular of the popular arts, poetry, might also fruitfully be reconsidered in terms of genre. Blaser's most recent book is *Pell Mell* (Coach House 1988); the selections here are from his lifework-in-progress, *The Holy Forest*.