

J MARC CÔTÉ / Editing with George

George Bowering loves to joke around and kid; he's a past-master at teasing or what might be called frat house humour. Ever since I was eighteen, he's been asking me about the spot on my shirt, just beneath my chin. When I look down, he raises his finger and catches my nose with his knuckle. This started thirty-six years ago. I don't fall for the joke anymore, but I did, on occasion, over the span of thirty years and three thousand miles of geography. His finger pointing to my chest is the physical, real-world analogue for the intellectual play he loves in conversation and in writing. George's revised version of this practical joke now is to ask me why I published *Pinboy* as a memoir and not a novel. "It's a novel," he likes to say. "Didn't you realise that?"

Pinboy—which was nominated for the BC National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction, and was chosen as one of the *Globe and Mail's* Top Five of 2012—was received by reviewers and fans alike as a memoir. As such, it falls into the broad category of literary non-fiction. This doesn't mean that it doesn't have the structure of a novel—it does—but it does mean that it isn't fiction. Truman Capote described *In Cold Blood*, an astonishing literary achievement completely devoid of the bathos Bowering is able to bring to his work, as a "non-fiction novel." But George would not say *Pinboy* is a non-fiction novel; he much prefers to attempt to unsettle his publisher and his readers by implying that the book, *Pinboy*, packaged, marketed, reviewed, and critically acclaimed as a memoir is really a novel, is really fiction.

This attempt to unsettle his publisher and his readers isn't meanness or a frat-house prank, though; it's actually a very serious way of provoking a thoughtful response. George is really asking, What's memoir? What's fiction? Is fiction made up of an amalgam of imagination and memories? Is memoir a less imaginative form of fiction? Bringing the discussion back to the book itself: Did Miss Verge, a teacher in the school he attended and where his father taught, really introduce the naïve teenage Bowering to the earthly delights of oral gratification? Or did the young Bowering merely imagine it, wish it? Or does the older and wiser Bowering want to relive a past he didn't actually experience? I don't know. Nor will the best reader. And it doesn't matter. Because what matters is that there once was a

young George Bowering, growing up in Oliver, BC, who had boundless physical and intellectual energy. The interior of BC was his playground and became, after years away and much education, the canvas for his work. This young man, over the period of just less than one year, discovered women. But he did not discover “women” as in he formed a crush on a girl or dated one. He discovered that women come in different circumstances, relationships, and roles—and that some of these roles were far more complex than his younger self had understood a mere one year earlier.

To put it most succinctly, I’ll quote the novelist Michael V. Smith, who wrote: “the things we longed for in our first fumbled moments of sexual awakening and practice are those that we fumble towards in our adult lives.” Does *Pinboy* contain those first and awkward moments of sexual awakening, but re-imagined and re-lived in a way that is much more satisfying? Does this make it any less real? Or does it make it more so.

How does George Bowering play with his reader? There are many examples, but two serve my purpose. About a third of the way into the book, Bowering writes “I never bought into the myth that you were supposed to dislike school. I liked it a lot.” Well, of course the young man liked school a lot—he had a teacher who was giving him blow jobs. That’s a simple answer and one that might be too common for the tastes of the more refined reader. But it’s accurate. The older Bowering knows that many of his readers will get a chuckle out of this.

In another part of the memoir, Bowering draws the reader’s attention to the question he likes to tease his publisher with: “I hope you realize that while these alarming occurrences did happen, the scraps of dialogue you find here could not be verbatim. In offering the dialogue I am trying to remember and present the spirit of the events. It will be as if I were writing something like a novel about actual events.” *A novel about actual events*. So what’s the difference between a memoir and such a novel? Truman Capote would probably say elevated language and structure. But why can’t a memoir have elevated language and structure? Do we reserve these for fiction only?

The real question, which George would never deign to ask because he would consider it too obvious, is this: do we create “fiction” out of our memories to understand them better? Do we construct stories—eventually, personal myths—to incorporate lived experience in such a way as to control it, and not have the

experience control us? These are psychological questions that I think Bowering would dismiss—he's not a fan of Freud and company—but these questions arise from a close reading of *Pinboy* and they do so for a reason. Is the older Bowering trying to understand how he came to relate to women?

If *Pinboy* is George Bowering's attempt to figure out the roles women have played in his life, then for sure it's not fiction. It's a thoughtful memoir, which plays with the reader and demands that the reader not take it too seriously at all—which, for those of you who've read a lot of Bowering, means we need to take him very seriously.

So what's fact? What's fiction? Is time past really past, or is it part of an accumulating ever-present present? When we read *Pinboy* are we reading about the young George Bowering, or are we reading the present George Bowering, or both? At what point does fact break down and become fiction—what is the half-life of fact?

One of the problems for fiction is verisimilitude; the writer must create the world anew on the page to the degree that his readers believe it unquestionably. Non-fiction writers are not tasked with the same technical challenge, as verisimilitude is unnecessary to establish in a memoir. Or is it? Is this perhaps why Bowering draws our attention to the idea of *a novel about actual events*?

Bowering the writer never takes anything for granted in his work, the least of which is his reader. He plays with his reader, just as he plays with his publisher, because he wants to achieve a degree of engagement that isn't just the simple, straight-forward writer-talking-to-reader. He wants the reader to be on high alert. It's another form of "Hey, what's that spot on your shirt?" It's playful, it's fun, and it requires active involvement, not a passive inaction. It's a rewarding relationship and it's a lasting one. One reading of *Pinboy*—my first—played in my mind, shimmering like a pointillist painting. It doesn't stay flat and still, it's not fixed in amber, as memories often are. It continues to fascinate me, questioning me about my preconceptions about its content and its form.

So why did Cormorant Books publish *Pinboy* as a memoir, a work of non-fiction, and not a novel? Because it is a memoir and to have called it "fiction" would have been to dishonour the life and work that went into its making.

There's no spot on my shirt, even though I ate a hot dog in the process of writing this.