

*An Introduction:*

# *Grannies, Nannies, Cronies, and Thinkers*



**Eric Miles Williamson**

With the rise of film and the consequent demise of fiction in America, increasing numbers of prose writers have begun to focus their energies on writing that which is not fiction. Prose writers from the Modern period to date have experimented with forms, attempting to wrangle narratives in ways that make fiction something that cannot be communicated to other people via celluloid, and in the Postmodern period fictioneers, albeit briefly, succeeded in producing work that was both accepted by a relatively large public and, at the same time, was impossible to produce on the big screen.

---

***“Personal essayists” are the next step above talk-show trailer-trash confessional.***

---

Although the general reading public has tired of the wordplay and formplay of writers such as Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, and Coover, and although experimental writers have been utterly marginalized, not even boasting a token or two in the Book-of-the-Month Club listings, people still read prose of the literary variety. As literary fiction has become less in demand, literary nonfiction has begun to flourish. On any given Sunday, the *New York Times* reviews three to four times as many books of nonfiction as it does books of fiction. While the *New Yorker* can no longer be counted on to publish a story in every issue, and many fine literary novels find themselves unpublished due to lack of popular demand, writers of nonfiction can

actually make decent livings writing essays and articles for slicks and collecting those articles into a book once in a while

These marketplace realities have not been lost on writers of prose. Fiction writers have always been writers of essays, as have poets, but a great number of weak fiction writers, finding themselves shut out of the shrinking commercial market for literary fiction, have begun to publish and promote works they claim follow in the tradition of St. Augustine, Rousseau, Montaigne, and Pascal. These works come in a variety of flavors, but they usually call themselves “personal essays” or memoirs.

The times, I suppose, are right for this: we are in the Oprah/Geraldo confessional phase of our general culture, an era during which the concept of shame is alien to the populace, and the “personal essayists” are the next step above talk-show trailer-trash confessional.

Fortunately, better writers have not resorted to becoming professional “personal essayists” and “memoirists”: William Gass, George Steiner, Marilynne Robinson, Jay Parini, and a host of other writers have opted to follow in the literary tradition of Dryden, Pope, Dr. Johnson, Carlyle, Ruskin, Pater, Lawrence, and Emerson, writing essays that are what I would call “Impersonal Essays,” essays whose subject is anything but the self, but which reveal *the self thinking*. We learn more about individuals by reading their meditations on subjects other than themselves than we do by reading pseudo-

fictionalized renderings of the self.

I started thinking about this focus issue a little over a year ago when I was interviewing for a job editing a literary journal. The Nonfiction Editor asked me, “What do you think of nonfiction?”

I could smell what was coming. I sat quiet, and then said, “Essays are the stuff of literature, a pivot-point between primary work and the author, and correspondence and journals and interviews are integral aspects of literary history,” or something like that, anyway.

The Nonfiction Editor tightened his brow. “*Literary* nonfiction,” he said.

I knew things were about to get ugly.

“Nonfiction is the literary auxiliary of fiction, as it is of poetry. When we read Eliot’s poetry, we are informed by his essays. Lawrence’s essays are as important as his fiction, and when he writes of his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, ‘This book will be about anything *but* Thomas Hardy,’ I think he’s getting it right. Intellectual essays and works of criticism tell us plenty about what the author is writing about, but more about the author himself.”

“No,” the Nonfiction Editor said. “I mean the *Personal* Essay.”

“Oh,” I said, and the look on my face, most likely a look as if I’d just been served a plate of turds as an entrée, must have given me away, even though I told some magnificent stretchers about how I thought personal essays were really nifty.

When I was in graduate school, there was a student whose fiction was so terrible that when he passed out his stories to the workshop, a universal pallor of dread misted the air like the fog rising from beneath Mac Flecknoe’s arse. His stories were a combination of dreamy sentiment (sediment?) and pseudo-intellectual pop-psychology of the lowest order poorly camouflaged by relatively elevated, francophile-derived word-bombs. His father or his mother or his grandparents were usually mentioned within the first

twenty words of the story, and his take on the culture was predictably sneering and condescending. No one was ever as smart as the snide narrator, who never learned anything but how right he had discovered himself to be about everything.

He wanted to become a professor of Creative Writing, but he couldn’t get his work published.

So he brewed up a scheme. One of his professors, himself a converted fiction writer whose work was awful and who, consequently, changed his genre to the “personal essay,” talked this student into becoming a “personal essayist” as well. You see, for every 1,000 works of fiction a given literary periodical receives, it receives only one or two essays. The odds of publishing anything called an “essay” are much greater—by a thousand-fold—than the odds of getting even a splendid story published by a lousy journal.

So the student simply started calling his awful stories “personal essays.”

He began getting published. Regularly and well.

He now runs his own university journal.

And he has tenure.

A simple gambit, really: basic intellectual/academic capitalism. As it says on the side of the Kaiser Permanente cement mixers, “Find a Need and Fill it.”

Fifteen years ago, I attended a reading delivered by a writer who wanted to become a professor at a state university. She introduced her work as non-fiction, and then read a memory-piece about her mommy. When she finished, the director of the English Department asked, “How is what you read non-fiction? It sounded like fiction to me.”

The writer stared at the director and then said, with obvious scorn, “Anyone can tell it’s a *nonfiction* voice.”

“?” from the crowd.

“If you don’t know, it’s not worth explaining,” said the writer.

That was fifteen years ago. I still haven't figured out just what a "nonfiction voice" is, but no doubt these days she would introduce herself as a personal essayist.

In Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily says, "I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down I should probably forget all about them."

And later, about the same diary: "You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy."

Cecily is an earlier version of the "personal essayist." What's truly disheartening is that Wilde was making fun of Cecily. What was once a comic figure has now become professorial material.

The "personal essay" is the brain-child of failed fiction writers who have discovered a way to avoid the rigors of philosophical labor as well as a way to avoid the aesthetic demands of the tradition of fiction. The personal essay usually argues its thesis through a single narrative example; this synecdochal method is inductive reasoning at its poorest. Poor inductive reasoning leads to stereotyping, overgeneralization, and a watering-down of the intellect. It's like saying you once met a man from Bolivia who had thirteen fingers and wore a Merry Andrews cap, and therefore all people in Bolivia have thirteen fingers and wear Merry Andrews caps. The specific experience of the writer is posited by "personal essayists" as if it is representative of the universal experience of mankind. "*It really happened*" has become their mantra and a credo which is in fact an apologia for bad writing, intellectual sophomorphism, and boring lives which writers of "personal essays" feel compelled, solipsistically and narcissistically, to share. All this, of course, ignores the larger issues of truth and the relation

ship between subjectivity versus objectivity when rendering in a blatantly fictional format prose which uses remembered (recovered?) dialogue, narrative compression and expansion, and any of a number of other fictional techniques.

Henry Miller is not known for decency, but at least he had the decency to call the *Tropics* novels.

Perhaps Wilde's Cecily would call herself a "memoirist" these days. She wouldn't be far off the mark. As you read this, memoirs are being churned out by undergraduates and graduate students across the land. Writing programs are packed with suburban kids telling all—their complaints about their parents, their worship of their grandparents, their shopping mall epiphanies and sorrows, their crippling boredom.

The memoir is the forebear of the personal essay, once produced exclusively by writers, thinkers, eccentrics, and public figures whose lives we wanted to know about. Winston Churchill's memoirs are of considerably more interest than a 22-year-old creative writing student's—a person who has only been an adult for four years. It seems rather preposterous, to me at least, that *children* are writing memoirs these days in their undergraduate courses. Rousseau's woodie while he's being spanked by his nanny isn't inherently more interesting than the naughty thoughts of an MFA student, but I'll submit that there's a difference between reading the "confessions" of a major literary figure and reading the "confessions" of so many lackbeards. *Speak, Memory* is published relatively late in Nabokov's career—as a memoir should be. If great writers can have the courtesy to wait until late in life to publish their memoirs, young writers should at least have the decency to wait until they have more than a decade or two of adulthood under their belts.

Luckily, memoirs do get written by people we want to know about, and essays

do get written about subjects larger than the day-to-day experiences of common individuals. And the intellectual essay survives and is as robust as ever: we find it on the pages of *American Scholar*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Criterion*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *American Book Review*, among many other periodicals. The intellectual essay—that breed of essay in which the author dissects a subject other than him or herself and actually makes an attempt to present new insight about the world in which we live—still gets written and still gets published, and though its market-share can't compete with personal essayists who are basically asking us to be Peeping-Toms into their lives, its long-term influence and literary importance remains constant.

Nonfiction is the future of prose. Literary fiction will, within the next generation, occupy a place similar to that of contemporary American poetry: just as only poets read poetry, so too will only fiction writers read fiction. When people want a story, they go to the movies. So for prose, the literary outlet and area of possibility is that of nonfiction. Not only that, but in the future if a prose writer wants to make a living writing prose while not spewing out genre fiction, he's going to be writing nonfiction.

Nonfiction is going to be where great literature which is also read by a population larger than that of its creators is going to be found. Its possibilities will expand and flourish and blossom. The tricks of fiction and the mission of the personal essayists and memoirists will fuse with the intellectual history of prose, and the product will be a canon of truly remarkable works.

*Eric Miles Williamson's novel, East Bay Grease, has just been released by Picador USA. He is Book Review Editor of Chelsea and teaches at San Jose State University.*