

**Real and Imagined:
Understanding the Differences Between Realistic Fiction and Creative Nonfiction**

Goal

Often when one finishes a novel, the first question one asks is, “Was that based on a true story? Did the author make up these characters, or are they figments of his imagination? Are they, in fact, real people?” While some of these questions are disputable, the fact remains that authors often base fiction in truth.

As my writing has progressed, I have noticed that, although I write primarily fiction, my work often traces themes, people, and plots from my own life and surroundings. Should I consider this creative nonfiction or fiction? The goal of this project is to discover exactly that. Through research and a personal creative process, I aim to discover the differences between fiction and nonfiction and what constitutes each.

Method

My method of exploration for this project will include several steps: research, observation, writing, and revision. First, I intend to read both books that are defined as creative nonfiction and realistic fiction. When possible, I will then research the authors to draw potential similarities between their lives and the worlds in their books. I will also note the differences between these genres. Next is observation, a skill that is key for any writer. To fulfill this requirement, I will take note of people that I notice in my everyday life—friends, family, people on the street and at the grocery store—and take notes on their specifics. Which characteristics must be changed for a fiction story and which can remain the same? How would I incorporate these into each genre respectively?

These observations will come to fruition in the third step, writing. This, of course, is one of the main parts of the project. I will write character sketches of the people from my observations, as well as possibilities about why they act and look the way they do. This will help with my transition from creative nonfiction to fiction. Finally, I will focus on revision, one of the aspects of writing that challenges me the most. I will go through these character sketches, as well as work I have already written, and examine them for truthfulness. Are the stories “too true”? Should they be considered nonfiction or fiction? The project will culminate with a thorough

understanding of the differences between these genres and a body of work that will display my mastery of both.

Interest and Preparation

“Real and Imagined” is an essential part of my work toward my Schreyer Honors Thesis, which will be a collection of short stories completed in the spring 2013 semester. The current project stresses several areas that I must improve upon before I write my thesis. Specifically, I need to work on revision, always a difficult task for me. Creating fiction that is truly fiction, not merely creative nonfiction that stretches the truth, is also a main focus. As there are few books about the technical aspects of writing, and most of these books are highly subjective, it will be best for me to conduct my own independent research in this area to find out what works best for me. The Discovery Grant would enable me to spend the summer finding “my method” of writing.

I am so confident in this project in part because I have had much preparation for it. As an English major, I have had much experience in writing, including intermediate and advanced fiction courses. I have been writing fiction seriously since I attended the Pennsylvania Governor’s School for the Arts four years ago. In addition, I have won several awards for my work, including the Lori Master Prize and the Katey Lehman Creative Writing Award at Penn State. Finally, I currently freelance for my hometown newspaper, the *York Daily Record*, about my experiences studying abroad, which has given me experience in creative nonfiction.

Contribution of the Faculty Supervisor

While “Real or Imagined” is largely an independent project, I will be under the guidance of Professor Charlotte Holmes, my faculty supervisor. Charlotte was my professor for English 412 last spring and will direct my Schreyer Honors Thesis, in addition to serving as my mentor. Consequently, she knows the strengths and weaknesses of my work quite well. I will look to her to recommend books and other materials for my research, as well as advice on writing techniques. However, since writing is a highly subjective process, Charlotte’s greatest contribution will be her encouragement to take my own advice and know my own mind. I look forward to working with her on this project.