

## **RMIT University**

### **David Carlin and Francesca Rendle-Short**

#### **Introduction**

We begin simply enough: what is nonfiction today? Our idea in this issue is to bring writers together to engage with the rich and vibrant contemporary debates around nonfiction, as it is becoming increasingly popular and varied as a mode of creative expression. We want to see what writers and readers, academics and researchers are thinking about in regard to this form and/or genre, creatively and theoretically. When we put out the call, we asked for papers that explored any aspect of nonfiction from memoir, ethics, the lyric essay, video essay, literary journalism, travel writing, food writing, regional writing, to the celebration, discussion or tribute to the work of a particular essayist or writer. We also sought papers that explored nonfiction at, or beyond, the margins of the literary, such as film, radio and online forms. We hoped to elicit a range of responses to showcase the diversity of the genre, to test its limits and possibilities. What would turn up?

The title of this issue ‘Nonfiction Now’ and our inspiration for the collection comes from a conference of nearly-the-same-designation held biennially since 2005, known as the Bedell NonfictionNow Conference. The Bedell NonfictionNow Conference, founded by American writer and teacher Robin Hemley, was presented by the Nonfiction Writing Program of The University of Iowa’s Department of English in Iowa City, USA, in 2005, 2007 and 2010. In 2012 NonfictionNow took place for the first time outside America, at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne is, like Iowa City, recognised as a UNESCO City of Literature. The nonfictionLab research group in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT co-presented the 2012 NonfictionNow Conference with The University of Iowa, Robin Hemley co-chairing the program with David Carlin.

The NonfictionNow Conference is a unique gathering of over 400 writers. It brings together leading writers, teachers of writing and students from around the world, inviting them ‘to lay down their pens, step away from their keyboards and swap notes on writing (and reading) nonfiction – right now’ (quoted in the Wheeler Centre publicity for the event, 2012); to focus on the practice, thinking, communication and writing of nonfiction in all its forms with panels and readings and the like.

The Special Issue was modeled on the spirit of this conference: its invitation to cross-disciplinary investigation, its attention to the intersections between the creative and the scholarly with the overarching aim to create a space to explore, discuss and argue about creative practices, contemporary debates and new directions in nonfiction.

This *TEXT* Special Issue: Nonfiction Now consists of 13 articles in three categories of submissions: seven refereed papers, four refereed creative works and two creative works (the latter subjected to a ‘blind’ panel of reviewers). We decided that we wanted to present the issue with a thematic logic rather than grouping the volume around these categories. With this in mind, we have arranged the papers in three sections: ‘Essaying’; ‘Reports from the field’; and, ‘Ways of looking’. As you can see from the titles of these sections, they represent different modes of critical practice and showcase the diversity of approaches to the genre.

‘Essaying’ gathers together experiments extending knowledge about the personal essay as a form within and beyond the margins of the literary. Sian Prior’s letter to David Foster Wallace on travel, the question of making stuff up, truth and authenticity, opens the selection on a playful note. Xu Xi’s essay-as-love-letter, ‘I had a “Tiger Mom”’, explores the idea of a negotiated memoir. It is complex, self-referential, both cheeky and bold: a conspiratorial exposition that explores the limitations and possibilities of the form. Kathryn Millard’s ‘A screenwriter’s *Reality hunger*’ is a minimalist experimentation in text and video contributing to contemporary debates about what it means to be writing in a digital era. Noëlle Janaczewska’s episodic experiment in form and logic bends our idea of the essay form to demonstrate its accommodating and protean character. David Carlin’s ‘Essaying the picture’ creates a form of address through a series of stills or vignettes as a method of drawing the reader into ‘the erotics and the mysteries’ of the imagination at work when ‘making pictures’. He argues: ‘Picturing can be a solitary or a shared hallucination. A creative act of will’ (6). What is pictured – in this as in other essays in this collection – is desire.

‘Reports from the field’ present accounts of immersive nonfiction practice in diverse contexts. Kate Rossmanith’s ‘The Magistrate and Mr Moore’ is an ethnographic reporting on the courts and the practice of magistrates as well as the place and role of the nonfiction writer. In this example of writing-as-infiltration, Rossmanith examines the role of narrative in the legal system, beginning with ‘a true story’:

‘I think of sentencing as a puzzle,’ the Magistrate confides, ‘I’ve got to make sure I have all the pieces, and that all the pieces are together. Then I have to arrive at a decision. It’s a huge task’ (3).

Another paper in this section, Peter Doyle’s ‘The kibitzing archive’ is an exploration of photographic archives, where the search and unfolding work of piecing together becomes collaborative and dialogic. The ‘re-storying’ of this encounter is also alchemical and transformative. The third report, Tara Goedjen and Caroline Grahams ‘Thin Top End’, is an account of a field trip to northern Australia, a reckoning with place. How ‘time stretches the highway’ and how the ‘ghosts of your own creation’ (11) grip writer and reader, both.

The final section, ‘Ways of looking’, presents a range of analytical and more conventionally structured papers addressing the issue’s topic through focused surveys and case-studies within specific and diverse subdomains of nonfiction practice such as narrative journalism, memoir, and literary studies at the margins of fiction and nonfiction. Barrie Jean Borich’s paper, ‘On nonfiction and consequence’, opens this

section. It is a call to arms, so to speak, examining the contemporary relationship of nonfiction literature to ‘actuality’. Borich argues that ‘the actual is as much character as subject ... a referent necessary to complete the meaning of the work’ (1). Kirsten Seale’s close reading of W.G. Sebald’s *Vertigo* celebrates this ‘shadowland’, that border of ambivalence between nonfiction and fiction. It is an exploration of the encounter between ‘the precarious and vertiginous quality of memory’ that runs throughout Sebald’s writing and what is at stake in the photograph and the notion of ‘being real’ (1). Jenny Weight’s paper ‘At the edge of documentary’ proposes a typology for thinking and action in her exploration of authorship in the online environment, discussing the implications of various modes of participatory nonfiction. Donna Lee Brien surveys the contemporary phenomenon of the eating disorder memoir in ‘Starving, bingeing and writing’, mapping its connections with, and distinction from, the food memoir genre across faultlines of the body, suffering and success. Finally, Matthew Ricketson’s case study ‘Navigating the access swell’ examines a shadowland of a very particular nature, that of WikiLeaks: what is not written about as much as what is. This paper brings critical distance to the subject and lays out narrative possibilities for both reader and writer.

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It is our hope that the papers and essays in this Special Issue will open up further conversations, bridging scholarly and creative practices, around the questions raised by nonfiction now.

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