

The Stories We Tell:

Creative Nonfiction Accounts of Our Research

Edited by Elsje Fourie and Christin Hoene

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Introduction

Elsje Fourie and Christin Hoene

Time comes into it
Say it. Say it.
The universe is made of stories,
not of atoms.

*Muriel Rukeyser, The Speed of Darkness*¹

This anthology combines creatively written accounts of research conducted by members of the University of Maastricht's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). We come from a faculty accustomed to looking beyond the physical nature of things; we might therefore find Rukeyser's poem particularly compelling, with its notion that stories swirl around us as effortlessly and pervasively as drops of water or molecules of air. To go a step further, that stories not only surround us, but are us—that our lives can hardly be imagined as anything other than a collection of stories we tell others and ourselves. And there's something for each of our disciplines in the poem's message. For the historians, the notion of stories sedimented slowly over time; for the philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists of science, the blurring of lines between the natural and the social. Those who study the arts might be struck by the sparse beauty of her words, while those among

us who study politics and globalisation are reminded that narratives are more ancient and powerful than borders.

This anthology is borne, however, from a suspicion that we scholars in the social sciences and humanities are not the only ones who believe that stories matter deeply. Tales, narratives, myths, yarns, fables, sagas, chronicles, episodes: whatever their flavour, stories seem to be a language we all speak in one form or another. We suspect this applies to researchers outside FASoS, too. In social psychology, criminology, and all sorts of other fields, scholars increasingly refer to a "narrative turn."

Of course, you don't need to be an academic at all to believe in the power of stories. The impulse to dissect last night's must-see HBO drama around the water cooler with colleagues, or to read just one more chapter of that new novel before bedtime is the same human impulse that likely prompted you to pick up the booklet you hold in your hands. And it is the same impulse that—we hope—will keep you turning its pages.

² At FASoS, we would particularly like to thank the Faculty Board and our colleagues Sally Wyatt, Aagje Swinnen, Anique Hommels, Esther Versluis, Darian Meacham, and Raf de Bont.

The 19 short vignettes contained herein are the results of our collective effort. We decided to write them in the form of creative non-fiction (CNF), a burgeoning literary genre that uses the techniques of creative writing to tell factually accurate narratives. In the words of a key proponent, CNF involves “writing true stories that provide information about a variety of subjects, enriched by relevant thoughtful ideas, personal insight, and intimacies about life and the world we live in.”³ If this sounds like a rather vague definition, that’s because the genre is indeed flexible. What matters is that its authors present their experiences and the experiences of others “truthfully” (here definitions vary but fundamentally involve keeping to an unspoken contract with the reader) but with the kind of writerly flair usually associated with fiction, poetry, and screenplays.

The idea for this volume came about when one of its editors, fresh from completing a creative writing course and a novel manuscript, returned to the office eager to further develop these skills, and to share them with colleagues. Three creative writing workshops at FASoS followed. What immediately became clear was just how much of an unfilled need there was at our institution for events such as these. Participants hailing from several faculties opened up to each other in surprising and inspiring ways over the course of several afternoons spent playing with words. So great was the enthusiasm that we decided not to end the project there, but to develop some of the short pieces we’d written together into a printed anthology. The project picked up a co-editor, a researcher with experience both in analysing creative writing and creating her own. A visually talented contributor and colleague, Sarah Anschütz, stepped up to design a cover image that strikingly evokes our volume’s theme. A final key step involved securing funding from a faculty board and a set of department heads innovative and generous enough to believe in the value of this rather unusual initiative.²

³ Gutkind, L. (2023). *What is Creative Nonfiction? Creative Nonfiction.* <https://creativenonfiction.org/what-is-cnf/>.

For the sake of cohesion, we gave all the contributors to this volume a more specific brief: to write a short vignette that either evoked a particular setting or recounted an event that they had encountered while conducting research. Within these modest constraints, approaches varied greatly. Some of the resulting pieces transport the reader to locations past, present, and even virtual through lush prose and sensory descriptions: Maud Oostindie makes the woodsmoke of the Italian Alps sing, and Brigitte Le Normand imagines what the bustling Yugoslav port of Rijeka must have looked, smelled, and tasted like in the 1950s. As we see through Yiming Wang's depiction of Chinese-language fan communities online, the places we write about can be offline, online, or both at once. Many of these settings

at first glance might appear ordinary. In Emilie Sitzia's museum, Paul Stephenson and Johan Adriaensen's drab "Eurocrat" offices, Sally Wyatt's dentist's chair and Ragna Zeiss' toilet, the seemingly mundane is brought to life and shown to be anything but. Each in their own way offer a

reminder that compelling stories can be found everywhere, if we only look closely enough.

Some vignettes contain a clear plot: Valentina Mazzucato's account of fieldwork in Amsterdam's stigmatised Bijlmer district and Karlien Strijbosch's depiction of a tense night among fellow travellers in Senegal both deploy suspense to keep us wondering what will happen next and then upend our expectations. Others focus on character, taking us into the minds and lives of the people they have studied. Through Jacob Ward we learn what once made a surprisingly influential British Telecom engineer tick, while Marie Rickert shows us that preschoolers Pim and Louis have interesting things to teach us as they play. We follow Aneta Spendzharova's

Many of us still felt "these sorts of things" don't get published in our usual ports of call.

Bulgarian "cryptoqueen" as she evades the FBI's attempts to track her down and with the help of Christin Hoene are invited to imagine how Indian physicist Jagadish Chandra Bose might have felt opening a research institute named after him during the height of British colonial rule.

Sarah Anschütz takes us into Esther's unassuming apartment in order to show how cultural barriers are broken down in real time. Then there are those authors who take the opportunity to explicitly explore their own relationships to their research subjects: Ferenc Laczó and Inge Römgens push the boundaries of the vignette form as a way of reflecting boundaries they would like to see pushed in their own disciplines; Elsje Fourie and Inge Melchior use their ethnographic visits to an Ethiopian shoe factory and Estonian war commemoration respectively as lenses through which to reflect on the culpability of the researcher in ethically grey areas.

As the above survey makes clear, we have therefore interpreted the concept of "story" loosely. Some of the writers, particularly the anthropologists among us, already had some experience with presenting their research in similar ways. Others were relatively new to this approach. What united contributors across their differences was the sense that so many things happen while we are conducting research—things that are funny, unsettling, chaotic, contradictory, atheoretical—that don't ever make it into the journal articles or the books. CNF might be on the rise both inside and outside academia, but many of us still felt "these sorts of things" don't get published in our usual ports of call.