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Abstract

The way in which literary genres are understood shapes how one reads and interacts with different texts. Genre expectations affect both how individuals choose texts to read, and then how those texts are understood. Therefore, labeling literature as a certain genre affects the relationship between writer and reader. Literary nonfiction is unlike most genres as it promises a certain truth to its readers. One cannot deviate too far from "the truth" in nonfiction writing and still fulfill the genre; the relationship a reader has with a text changes if it is not considered "true enough." Author James Frey, who marketed a fictionalized story as a nonfiction memoir, has received backlash because readers felt lied to after reading a "mislabeled" text. In cases like this, the connection between reader and writer, as well as reader and text is lost. This is because texts can only be understood in the context, or genre, in which they are placed. James Frey's memoir can no longer be judged upon a genre standard since it cannot claim the truth that nonfiction promises. If this memoir was marketed as fiction instead, all could have been alleviated as his text would have been judged upon a different set of standards. Fiction is most commonly understood as being imaginary, so it is perceived accordingly. Within the fiction genre, there are subcategories like romance, horror, and science fiction. All of these subcategories have their own sets of rules that must be followed in order to stay true to the genre. Some writers like Diana Gabaldon, author of the popular *Outlander* series, feel as though their works cannot be defined by a certain genre as they do not follow any standard genre conventions. Publishers then must decide how to market a text to make it as successful as possible. However, this marketing may not always align with reader expectations for that genre. Therefore, genre labels impact how one understands and reads literature as a whole. In this project, I aim to push the boundaries of the

body of literature. I have compiled information gleaned from both outside sources as well as my own personal research of reading books with ambiguous genres. With this information, I have created a research paper, written a short story, and revised older short stories based on my new-found knowledge of mixed-genre literature.

Research

"I'll be over here," I called to my mother as I floated away to the "thriller" section of the

used bookstore, keen on locating a particular book.

My mother, not looking for anything in particular, surveyed the general "fiction" section.

The "thriller" section proved to be unfruitful, but I decided to make a last ditch effort and search

for the book I was looking for in the "fiction" section. Almost immediately, I succeeded in my

conquest and located the book. It seemed odd that I could view a genre classification in one way,

but the store could view it in another. I thought of genres as static, immovable, not up to

interpretation. Bookstores are first categorized by genre, so this is the first aspect one notices

about a text. Since my mother was not looking for anything in particular, she browsed the genres

she knew she liked. Based upon how she understood different genres, she, like most people,

made the choice about what to read accordingly. The way genres are defined in literature affects

the relationship the reader has with both text and author.

The purpose of the genre label for readers is that it "sets a certain *horizon of expectations*

and offers a key to understanding the text (Jauss qtd by Nyboe 370). When one reads a certain

genre, one has expectations for that genre. For example, one expects a romance to have a happy

ending. These expectations then provide a way to understand the text as it can be placed within

an overarching group of similar texts. Genre labels are essential because "classification shapes

our practices of understanding and evaluating particular works" (Friend 179). Therefore, genres

provide a set of standards to judge a text upon. Moreover, "our account of why a work belongs in

a given category should shed light on why and how the category figures in our appreciation of

the work" (Friend 180). If one is drawn to a particular genre, it can be because of the conventions

of that genre. However, classifying genres is more than just grouping like-texts together. "Not-statements" are essential in categorizing genres because "generic identity is built up from a series of contrasts to other genres" (Freadman qtd by Nyboe 376). One can understand a genre as what it is not. For example, a romance will not engage in crime like a thriller would. Yet, defining genres, even based upon a commonly understood set of standards, is not as easy as it may seem.

Genres are difficult to define because "'one theorist's *genre* may be another's *sub-genre* …and indeed what is *technique*, *style*, *mode*, *formula* or *thematic grouping* to one may be treated as a *genre* by another.' In short, there can be no universally agreed upon characterization of genre" (Chandler qtd by Bishop and Starky 98). For example, a theorist may view historical fiction as its own genre or as a subgenre of fiction (and therefore not its own genre classification). In addition, a theorist may view the hero's journey as a genre, or simply as a character arc within a story. Even though there are blurred lines in how genres are constituted, there are still overarching genre conventions that create potential for authorial intention to be lost as "the writing itself may become formulaic, so reliant upon a set of rigid conventions that there is little room for creativity" (Bishop and Starky 96). When one analyzes a text in terms of genre, one would momentarily avoid content, "focussing only on…particular features…of the genre… and why those features make it recognizable as such" (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 67-68). Genre-based reading also allows readers to reflect in terms of idea systems being brought into play, how those idea systems shape writing, what roles the readers of texts are being asked to perform, and why they are being asked to perform those roles (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 68). This is why "literary texts quite often present themselves with a genre designation, thus attempting to self-classify before any potential readers have a chance to experience and evaluate the actual

text" (Nyboe 365). This designation therefore attempts to dictate the relationship between reader and text. However, the way in which readers understand a genre continually changes as the genre labels themselves change.

Change in genre "occurs because of the influence of works or subgenres with contra-standard features" (Friend 192). When authors defy typical genre standards, new genres are created. This is interesting since "we understand and describe texts by the genres they engage with, but…these genres are simultaneously being changed, expanded, or reshaped by the very same texts" (Nyboe 379). In this way, genres not only define texts, but texts can come to define new genres. It has been found that subgeneres "can undermine the expectations associated with the broader [genre] causing…categories to change over time…suggest[ing] that the more general expectations are ultimately irrelevant…the more specific genres matter" (Friend 195). Some broader categories of genres are becoming less relevant to meaning than more specific subgenres. As subgenres continue to expand over time, "definitions will…be contested in the process of their shifting" (Bishop and Starky 98). Genre definitions are continually expanding as literature does. In particular, the definition of nonfiction as a broader category has been contested recently.

Nonfiction is unlike most genres as it promises a certain truth to its readers. It is unclear how far one can deviate from the "truth" in nonfiction writing and still consider it "true enough" to fulfill the genre. However, the relationship a reader has with a text changes if it is not considered "true enough." As humans, we tend to understand the world in binaries; it is either a truth or a lie. It is impossible though to consider anything an "absolute truth." Judith Ortiz Cofer, author of the memoir, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*,

explores where to draw the lines around what is considered nonfiction. She asks the questions: "How does nonfiction arrive at the truth that lies beyond the fact? What proportion of facts is necessary to make a story a work of creative nonfiction as opposed to fictionalized autobiography?" (Cofer 27). Cofer goes on to comment that, "factual accuracy is an important part of the contract my books offer to my readers" (28). In this way, Cofer aims to have a certain "truthful" relationship with her readers, and even "to establish an emotional link between reader and text" (Cofer 27). The relationship readers have with Cofer's text would be impacted by her "lying." However, can "the truth" even be trusted since "the past is something most of us revise automatically, and without malice or evil intent or even any conscious awareness of doing so" (Cofer 29)? Moreover, "we are constantly changing our own personal narrative so that it matches our idea of who we are and in what role we see ourselves" (Cofer 29). Therefore, nothing can be classified as an "absolute truth" because everyone remembers situations in different ways based upon how they identify.

Cofer goes about "investigating the truth of [her] life as a witness to it" (Cofer 29). Indeed, "humans agree that what we call reality depends on its being observed by at least one person" (Harrison 20). If we do not have a witness to corroborate a memory, it cannot be trusted —especially considering we are constantly revising memories. However, when Cofer asks her family about stories from her childhood, she says that, "the stories varied dramatically, even wildly, one from the other" (Cofer 29). If we cannot trust ourselves alone with memories, yet eyewitnesses are unreliable, how can we ever determine "the truth?" Understanding the lack of truth inherent in memories then threatens the importance we place upon them (as we seem to obsess over "the truth"). Before attempting to read James Frey's texts entitled *A Million Little*

Pieces and *My Friend Leonard*, I felt an incredible resentment as both were marketed as memoirs, though it has since come to light that many details in his memoirs were found to be either exaggerated or untrue. Many people read his texts without first knowing this and ended up feeling lied to when the truth did come out. I am in a very different situation because I knew "the truth" before reading his texts. However, knowing "the truth," did not stop me from feeling what others felt after the fact. Frey could have done something as simple as writing a note like, "slightly embellished," in the cover of his novel, or marketing his novel as fiction, to prevent all of this unrest. Classifying his text as nonfiction completely changed how readers understood it. The question remains, how much creative liberty can a nonfiction author take before impacting the relationship between reader and text? Cofer defines truth with the help of Virgina Woolf, saying that truth in writing comes from "personal impressions, the tracks you follow back to your moments of being" (Cofer 29). It would seem then that it is the author's intention that matters more than the actual facts. Perhaps Frey knew he was lying in his memoir and this came across as disingenuous. Cofer attempts to promise her readers "truth," so that a reader can connect to her memories, even if they are not complete facts. There is a difference between an honest mistake coming from real emotions and actual fabrications.

Nonfiction gets difficult to define again when one takes into account that some people view memoirs as texts written by famous people. Cofer witnesses this problem firsthand when a friend brings it to her attention. In response, she comments, "I realized that memoir was not the right label for what I wanted to accomplish in these narratives" (Cofer 26). How we understand a genre impacts how we read it, and a label can be limiting. To cope with the limiting nature of genre labels, Cofer veers from writing what one might think of as a "traditional memoir," instead

opting to have a novel-like memoir that a reader might be able to have a "direct psychic impact" with, something "that conventional autobiography and nonfiction seemed to lack, since their aim was often telling a life, not sharing it" (Cofer 27). In this way, Cofer seems to defy aspects of the nonfiction genre in that she is not just dictating aspects of her life, but actually treating the reader as someone who could partake in "moments of being" with her. (Cofer 26). Cofer's memoir defies genre in other ways, as it is "a blending of poetry and prose" (Cofer 26). We currently do not have the language to define this genre-bending piece, so its "truth" cannot be measured. Perhaps we should not be judging Cofer's text based upon the premises of nonfiction if her text cannot be placed in that category. However, being that her text was defined as a memoir (a piece of nonfiction), we have no choice but to view and interact with the text as such, which impacts our relationship to it.

Though Cofer promises truth in her memoir, we cannot trust that any part of it is actually "the truth" if there is no way to measure it. In this way, no piece of nonfiction is indeed nonfiction, thus rendering its definition void and impacting how we, as readers, relate to it. However, assuming Cofer recalls memories in ways unique to her, this can still tell us about her as a person, making the connection between writer and reader, or reader and text, present even if "the truth" is not. Cofer then promises us not "the truth," but *her* truth. We must accept that "'the feelings are the facts'" and that unless a nonfiction author fabricates grandiose details within a piece, perhaps our interaction with the text is unchanged (Harrison 25). As long as the imagination of the author is used "to find the language and complexity of real lives, not imagined ones," we must accept the work as nonfiction (Schwartz 41). However, the language in defining nonfiction as well as our conception of what it is, is indeed lacking and altogether inaccurate as

no memory is an "absolute truth." The concept of inviting imagination is commonly thought of in fiction, but it is also present in nonfiction when narrative structure allows for it, so, "the right way to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction focuses attention, not on how the parts of a work add up to the whole, but instead how the whole work is embedded in a larger context" (Friend 187). Therefore, a text's relationship to other texts within its genre can speak to its significance. This approach can be more useful than simply analyzing the characteristics that place a text within a genre. The context in which one understands something creates the meaning derived. Many texts are placed within the fiction genre and its subgenres, so it is important to understand what compromises fiction in addition to nonfiction.

Fiction is a popular genre to write in because it offers "an opportunity not just to tell… (life) stories, but to embellish them as well" (Bishop and Starky 90). In this way, fiction can offer the writer more freedom than nonfiction often allows for. However, the fiction genre can also be limiting. Even though fiction is thought of as imaginary, it must be considered "more believable than real life" to be successful (Rios qtd by Bishop and Starky 93). If fiction is too unbelievable or touts unrealistic characters, it can be harder for readers to identify with the story or characters. Unbelievable fiction also has the possibility of seeming less genuine, causing readers to feel manipulated. Indeed, "fiction writers keep returning to the idea that fiction has a moral purpose" (Bishop and Starky 94). This complicates the commonly held belief of fiction being merely "imaginary." Fiction has to be written just as purposefully as nonfiction in order to align with reader values and expectations. Though readers value many different aspects of a given text, "*how* [one] read[s] a text determines the sort of fiction [one] value[s]," and how one reads a text is also largely determined by the genre in which it is placed (Rabinowitz qtd by Bishop and

Starky 92). Therefore, how one understands different genres creates knowledge and preferences. Though fiction texts can be placed in a variety of more specific subgeneres to create meaning, there is a substantial divide within the fiction genre between what is referred to as "genre fiction" and what is considered "literary fiction."

In definition, "'genre fiction' refers to novels found in sections labeled Romance, Horror, Crime, Spy, Science Fiction, and so on" (Bishop and Starky 96). The average person is unaware that these subgenres fall under the category of "genre fiction," thinking them to just be representative of fiction in general. Genre fiction "gets its name from the fact that books written in the genre adhere to a specific set of conventions that readers of the genre expect, if not demand" (Bishop and Starky 96). For example, if someone is a fan of fantastical elements within stories, they would tend to seek out a text labeled "science fiction." In contrast, literary fiction is a subset of fiction mostly only known to those within the writing community. It does not follow genre conventions and attempts to showcase literary merit. Many creative writing professors view genre fiction as not nuanced or subtle enough, but "there's very little commerce when it comes to literary fiction" (Petracca qtd by Bishop and Starky 91). There are "more books being sold now than ever, [and] they're mysteries, romances, cookbooks, how-to books" (Petracca qtd by Bishop and Starky 91). Being that literary fiction does not follow genre conventions, there are no expectations that one has for this genre. This could be an explanation for why few people seek it out. One might be able to assume they will like a certain romance because they liked another, but one cannot make this assumption with literary fiction because each piece is vastly different. The following or lack thereof of genre conventions marks the difference between genre fiction

and literary fiction. Indeed, romances may follow the most genre conventions and have the most reader expectations out of any subgenre.

Romances are characterized by "snappy dialogue, well-crafted scenes, connection between the characters, and details of the character's lifestyles" (Wyatt et al. 121). There are five further categorizations within the romance subgenre, which are "contemporary, historical, Regency, suspense, and paranormal" romances (Wyatt et al. 121). Though these categorizations all follow standard romance conventions, each category is unique in its own right. As "one of the earliest of the classic romance subgenres," the Regency romance "helps provide a foundational introduction to the romance genre as a whole" (Wyatt et al. 121). In this way, Regency romances are classified by more than just the time period in which they were written. Instead they offer a template for contemporary romance novels, which are "loosely defined as a romance set after World War II…often incorporat[ing] many of the aspects of other romance [categorizations]… account[ing] for a wide and flexible swath of the romance world, with a huge range of approaches and styles" (Wyatt et al. 122). Contemporary romances offer the most room for experimentation, but romances in general continue to adapt as the creativity of its authors does.

The romance genre began to change significantly in the 1980s as authors "began adding large doses of suspense to their novels," creating the paranormal romance (Wyatt et al. 123). Within a paranormal romance, one can find time travel, vampires, and shape-shifters, and even aspects of science fiction and fantasy (Wyatt et al. 124). Since paranormal romances have crossover appeal with other genres, it "has experienced a resurgence in popularity over the past several years due to the emergence of authors skilled in world-building and readers willing to suspend disbelief to follow them" (Wyatt et al. 124). Paranormal romances are mainly

characterized by "alpha protagonists—powerful men and women willing and able to protect the

vulnerable…[and] the clash between the supernatural and the ordinary" (Wyatt et al. 124). The

paranormal romance is an example of when romance categories "blend, as many [paranormal

romances] include elements of historical romance and romantic suspense" (Wyatt et al. 124).

Diana Gabaldon, author of the popular *Outlander* series, includes many elements of the

paranormal romance in her texts, but has said: "I don't object at all to romances, but I don't write

them. I don't observe the conventions of the genre—or of any other, for that matter." However,

Gabaldon can attest that, "we write stories for ourselves, certainly, but once we take the step to

show our fiction to other readers we can be sure that it will be met with a complex and

conflicting set of responses, many of which are out of the writer's control" (Bishop and Starky

95). Though Gabaldon prefers her texts not be categorized, they need to be in order to be sold;

readers better understand texts when they are placed within a context. This does not stop her

from genre-mixing though.

 Genre-mixing is something that many authors engage in. Most notably, Shakespeare

mixes genres, "from act to act, scene to scene, even from line to line, he ranges from the tragic to

the comic, from high diction to low" (Bishop and Starky 96). Indeed, writing texts "for an

intelligent, attentive audience is likely to involve dipping into and drawing from a number of

'genres'" (Bishop and Starky 97). In order to create a compelling text, genre mixing is often

necessary. Interestingly, standard genre conventions play a part in genre-mixing as "genres play a

role in, and are even a premise for, creativity. Without any pre-established expectations to break,

and without any (perceived) regularities to play up against, no innovation would be

possible" (Fowler qtd by Nyboe 380). The ways in which authors break genre conventions

creates meaning. When authors juxtapose multiple genres in one text, meaning can be derived by "identify[ing] the different genres" (Bishop and Starky 97). In this way, genres still provide a guide for meaning even when their conventions are broken. Diana Gabaldon writes, "I don't like genre labels in the first place; I would much rather have my books taken on their own terms–I think they don't belong to any genre at all—or all of them" (Gabaldon). However, "there is no genreless text" as we, as humans, understand through classification (Derrida qtd by Nyboe 381). However, it can be difficult to define a text within one genre because "even though every text has generic markers, they do not necessarily take the form of explicit genre labels" (Nyboe 366). When a text does not fall under a clear genre, it is up to the author's adviser or marketer to decide how to classify the text.

It is important that readers' advisers know about different genres in order to best market texts. For example, the young adult genre is usually classified by having a young protagonist, but what about when there are adult themes within the text? How is this literature classified? There is no succinct answer as something like this depends on the marketer. The marketer will assign genre to a text based on what they believe will sell the most copies. In response to classifying *Outlander,* Gabaldon notes that "the publisher held onto the book for 18 months, trying to figure out what to sell it as. They finally decided that–of all the different classifications the books could fit in–'Romance' was by far the largest single market" (Gabaldon). Therefore, the market can facilitate how a text is classified. Gabaldon goes on to say, "I agreed that they could market the paperback [as a romance]…provided that if and when the books [in her series hit the New York Times bestseller list], they would reposition them as Fiction" (Gabaldon). Her texts did hit the list, but she writes, "it then took me a number of years to force Barnes and Noble to move the

books out of the Romance section. I finally did it by writing a rather rude letter to the then-CEO of B&N, pointing out that another bookstore chain, who shelved the books as Fiction, sold 40% more of all my titles than did B&N" (Gabaldon). Those who are fans of the romance genre have certain expectations that *Outlander* does not fulfill since it does not observe any standard romance conventions. Therefore, marketing *Outlander* as a romance proved to be not as successful as marketing it as fiction. Mixed-genre literature can sometimes be misunderstood, especially since texts are only classified under a single category. Indeed, the genre label serves as "a marketing tool adapting to the tastes of the audience" (Nyboe 368). Genre distinctions can often come down to marketing strategies, but can impact how readers receive a text.

The New York Times controls the context in which readers receive texts since their best sellers are, "authoritatively ranked lists of books sold in the United States, sorted by format and genre" (New York Times). Besides format (i.e. paperback versus hardcover), texts are sorted by genre, making that the first aspect one notices. How someone understands a certain genre impacts both how they choose a text to read and then how they understand that text. There are some rules when categorizing a book as a certain genre, but these rules are often flexible, allowing marketers to classify a text in the way they see fit. However, marketing a text as a certain genre when that text does not follow genre expectations, might result in less copies being sold. It is in this way that genres shape our basis for understanding literature. Genres are not static and will continue to change, so our perception of what constitutes a certain genre will need to change as well.

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