



Creative Nonfiction



By John Loofbourow, MD

THE BOOK *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, by journalist John Berendt, is a literary portrait, some would say a caricature, of Savannah, Georgia. The author, a former editor of *New York Magazine* and columnist for *Esquire*, studied Savannah, collecting information on its colorful past, its people, and a particular murder. His book is an entertaining and commercially successful work of creative nonfiction.

He states: "... the characters are real.... I have used pseudonyms for a number of them, and in a few cases I have...(altered) their descriptions... have taken certain storytelling liberties...my intention has been to remain faithful to the...drift of events as they really happened." His problem came later, when people he portrayed were recognizable and went to court, either because he was too accurate or not accurate enough.

Berendt's methodology is all too common in the press, on television, and in historic or political writing. I believe this stems mainly from economic factors. News, for example, must be commercially viable; people pay most readily for what they like to consume, whether the fare is political, prurient, humorous, or shocking. Successful providers of news, therefore, are wise to measure and to meet the demand.

Why, otherwise, when there is a wide world of fact, do we hear only one identical story over and over and yet over again from the multiple-mouthed news media? Only when two powerful and moneyed interests are in opposition do we hear both sides of an issue, as in the case of last fall's proposition that would have required most employers to provide health insurance.

Otherwise what we hear is often misinformation - not always wrong, but typically selective and incomplete. That is why we are taken totally unaware by major world events like the fall of the USSR, and why we pass propositions that tax everyone to finance private commercial interests who bankroll the initiative.

Most authors of historic novels offer fiction based on loose historical fact. John Michener refined the process, researching his subject exhaustively, often for years at a time, and involving large teams of assistants to gather factual material. In his novels *Alaska*, *Hawaii*, *Chesapeake*, and *The Source*, there is a characteristic grand sweep of history in the telling - factual, entertaining, but nonetheless clearly presented as a story.

Of course, there are dangers in the creative nonfiction that has recently become popular, perhaps because people lack confidence in historical reports, preferring to revert to personal accounts. The problem is that they, too, can be mistaken for fact. My daughter, Lili, who is teaching college English, wondered how her students gained their knowledge of the world. "How many of you know," she asked, "the history of Pearl Harbor?" Hands went up. "Because of the movie?" Hands stayed up. Movies like "Pearl Harbor" and "Schindler's List" and "Thin Red Line" and "Titanic" have no responsibility to be factual; yet they shape our perception of history.

The case might be made that all writing, all words themselves, are a kind of creative non-

fiction. I see a word, and try to make out its meaning, to make it real or non-fictional. Yet, to do, so I must create in my mind the object or idea that word implies. Words are linguistic symbols, metaphoric in nature, where one thing implies or stands for another, and so language is always altered by interpretation.

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