

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

A Preface

In January 2010, Dinty W. Moore sent us an email proposing a third book in our popular *Field Guide* series, *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, which would focus on “composing excellent memoir, essay, and factual writing in the very short form.”

The timing was perfect. We had recently been discussing two goals we had for Rose Metal: first, to broaden the scope of our list by soliciting more work in hybrid nonfiction forms, and second, to develop our *Field Guide* series into a trilogy—a trifecta of craft study of hybrid forms. Dinty’s proposed book was exactly what we had been hoping for and hadn’t yet articulated.

We were also excited by the opportunity to work with Dinty again. He had long been a friend of the Press: reading and blurbing an early manuscript of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, and judging our Fourth Annual Short Short Chapbook Contest. Meanwhile, we had long been admirers of his writing and his work on the journal *Brevity*, which has done so much to bring attention to the short nonfiction form. Started by Dinty in 1997, *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* has been the online face and voice of flash nonfiction, publishing primarily creative essays of 750 words or less by both the genre’s newest and most established writers, as well as craft essays, book reviews, and a blog.

Dinty also possessed the exact triad of skills that we aim to embody in each *Field Guide*: the perspectives of writers, teachers, and editors. Dinty’s career and qualifications attest to his ability to shift seamlessly among all three viewpoints: he has written extensively in and about the nonfiction form, he has taught nonfiction at various universities, and he has edited a number of anthologies and *Brevity*. He would have no trou-

ble assembling a group of respected essayists for *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction* that represented all of those perspectives and more, offering the first book-length discussion of the craft of writing flash nonfiction.

As with our previous *Field Guides*, we didn't want to weigh down or pigeon-hole flash nonfiction with strict definitions, word counts, or jargon-laden scholarly analysis. Encompassing any number of sub-genres and possibilities—memoir, argumentative, informative, personal, braided, mosaic, and meditative essays, to name just a few—flash nonfiction seemed our slipperiest genre yet. How to go about creating a cohesive craft guide without limiting the form with arbitrary parameters and labels?

Luckily Dinty had a solution, right there in the second paragraph of his pitch letter:

In his introduction to the anthology *In Short*, Bernard Cooper suggests that short nonfiction requires “an alertness to detail, a quickening of the senses, a focusing of the literary lens ... until one has magnified some small aspect of what it means to be human.” This captures the challenge very well, I think, and the *Field Guide* will attempt to break down the units of his recipe—alertness, quickening, focus—into understandable craft elements.

Some small aspect of what it means to be human—a binding force full of craft essay possibilities. Also a tall order, but one that gets at the heart of what's so compelling about good flash nonfiction: the writer's experience of the world made small and large at the same time. While flash fiction has been getting the majority of the short form publicity in recent years, this sister species of flash has been steadily growing more popular among readers and writers. Bound by similar length restrictions as flash fiction, short form nonfiction also contends with another major challenge: the constraint of telling the truth. The writer's life and thoughts are compressed and placed on the page to be examined by the reader with neither extended exposition nor the veil of fiction for protection.

The *Field Guide* that follows is everything we hoped for when we enthusiastically read Dinty's pitch two and a half years ago. As a press devoted to bringing literary attention and readership to hard-to-catego-

alize and under-appreciated genres, we are proud to offer a book that illuminates flash nonfiction with a diverse range of views and voices, as well as with wisdom, humor, and compelling prose. Being human has many aspects, so you may find yourself laughing at a witty discussion of point of view, wondering at the smallest details of the animal world laid bare, gasping as dogs and children put themselves in danger, and grieving over essay examples about September 11th and Hurricane Katrina. Throughout this book many small aspects of what it means to be a writer, editor, and teacher of flash nonfiction form a multi-dimensional discourse on a beloved and burgeoning genre.

Dinty's **introduction** offers a detailed history of the form, following the genre from early Classical manifestations in Greece and Japan, through the influence of French father of the essay Michel de Montaigne and the essay's evolution in England and the U.S. as printing technologies made it more widely available, to the coalescence of a more defined flash nonfiction form in the 1980s and 1990s and the genre's amazing popularity today.

Twenty-six conversational, insightful essays follow, all written by current practitioners, editors, and teachers of the form, and each illuminating a different aspect of the craft of writing flash nonfiction. Each essay ends with an **exercise** or **prompt**, as well as an **essay example** so that readers can test out and apply the ideas of the essayists to their own writing and study. The table of contents groups the essays by subject, which helps direct readers and teachers to areas of particular interest. These essays, exercises, and examples make great teaching tools, both in the classroom and for individual study, but are also meant to be an enjoyable and thought-provoking read for anyone interested in the genre and its various voices, traditions, and manifestations.

Like the previous *Field Guides*, this one concludes with a **list of further reading** in flash nonfiction, suggested by the press, editors, and essayists, and showcasing the richness and diversity of the field.

In this third *Field Guide* installment, we were also thrilled to once again have at our disposal the amazing skill of book designer Rebecca Saraceno, and a beautiful new piece of crow cover art from Pamela Callahan. Pamela's crows, in their many poses and articulations, have become

the emblem of our *Field Guide* series, representing our goal of taking the concept of a field guide and its cataloging of the flora and fauna of a region for those exploring it, and making the format exciting and new, yet recognizable, by applying it to genres that have yet to be taken stock of and examined. Pamela's crows gather, blend, shadow, swim, play, and defy expectations.

We hope this *Field Guide* will encourage you to engage more fully with the startling and wonderfully hybrid landscape of flash nonfiction. As with all great nonfiction, it's your own experience that matters, distilled down to those instants of image and truth worth sharing that you find along the trail.

—*Abigail Beckel & Kathleen Rooney*

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