



Miles Harvey

*The "So What" Factor*

The Two Inmates: Research in Creative Nonfiction  
and the Power of "Outer Feeling"



The premise of this essay is that writers are often prisoners of our own stories. The more drafts we crank out, the more details we add or subtract, the more narrative strategies we attempt, the more we sometimes wind up feeling walled in—a creative confinement the essayist Debra Gwartney attributes to “the traps of anecdote.” Often, Gwartney explains, writers “get so attached to the episodic ‘what happened’” that we can’t free ourselves to “explore the narrator’s inner life, the “who am I” (Gwartney, 23-24).

Yes, but how do we make this escape? How do we find a way to probe the inner life, to gain perspective on the self, to transcend the traps of anecdote? As I wrestle with such questions in my own work, I often find myself meditating on a pair of men who lived pivotal parts of their lives in isolation. I like to think of them as the two inmates.

---

The face of one inmate will be familiar to readers of *Assay*. That dashing fellow in the ruff is, of course, Michel de Montaigne, the 16<sup>th</sup> century nobleman who invented the literary genre to which this publication is devoted—*essay*, a word he adopted from the French verb for making an attempt, trying something out, putting it to the test. On his 38<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1571, Montaigne legendarily withdrew from what he called “the slavery of the court and of public duties” and set up his writing table in the tower of his family castle near Bordeaux (qtd. in Kramer 34). There, in happy solitude, he began work on the first of what by the end of his life would be 107 separate essays—about 1,000 pages in all.

When readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century think about that tower, we tend to picture it as a place of seclusion and contemplation, a place where Montaigne could concentrate on the one subject he found endlessly fascinating. As he famously announced in the preface of the *Essays*: “Reader, I am myself the substance of my book” (Montaigne 24). In her brilliant biography *How to Live*, Sarah Bakewell describes the way in which Montaigne “questioned himself again and again, and built up a picture of himself—a self-portrait in constant motion” (Bakewell, *How to Live* 5). This, as many scholars have argued, is Montaigne’s single greatest contribution to the world of letters: making the self a legitimate subject of literature. And while it’s hard to argue with that conclusion, I nonetheless think we sometimes focus too much on this aspect of his work. In so doing, we risk not only misunderstanding Montaigne but also overlooking important possibilities in our own efforts to bring the self to the page.

Let’s go back to the inmate’s cell—that tower in southwestern France. The room in which Montaigne wrote tells us a lot about the way he worked and the way he thought. Opposite his writing table was a wall filled with books—more than 1,000 of them, a sizeable collection for the time. And around him were windows that looked out across the countryside. For Montaigne, in short, discovering the self was not simply an inward journey. It required looking outward, as well. And it also required research.

Take, for example, “On Cannibals,” his famous essay about Native Americans. Montaigne’s shelves contained a healthy collection of books about New World exploration, and they clearly informed this

---

essay. He also repeatedly tested his ideas against the work of classical Greek and Roman authors —“testimony from antiquity,” as he called it (Montaigne 107). But even that was not enough for him. By the end of the essay, he was in Rouen, attempting to interview one of the Native Americans who been brought back to that port city by explorers. True, his interpreter turned out to be so inept—so “hindered by stupidity,” as a frustrated Montaigne put it—that the essayist was unable to communicate with this stranger from across the sea (Montaigne 119). But his approach was so outward-looking that no less an authority than the great anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss considered Montaigne to be the first social scientist.

“I would have everyone write about what he knows and no more than he knows,” Montaigne wrote in “On Cannibals” (Montaigne 108). But this dictum was hardly an endorsement of inwardness, ignorance or intellectual laziness. Montaigne was not arguing that people should *write less*—just that they should *know more* before they write. And so, he set out to know *everything*. This endless curiosity is what allowed him to connect all those dots, to follow all those bounding ideas down unfamiliar roads, circuitous byways and paths barely visible through the underbrush. As Jane Kramer once observed in *The New Yorker*, “He would have loved Google”(Kramer 40).

Research, reporting, engagement with the external world—these things, embodied by Montaigne’s bookshelves and windows, are the elements of storytelling we tend to overlook in his work. And perhaps that says more about us than about him. We live, after all, in what scholars sometimes call a “culture of confession,” an omnipresent ethos of self-help and talk therapy, Facebook and Twitter, *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*. The currency of this culture is “inner feelings,” and we sometimes allow ourselves to believe that simply by expressing those feelings (as opposed to exploring them) we can create meaning. But as countless frustrated essayists have learned, this is simply not the case. In many instances, the more we focus on “inner feelings,” the more they start to look like walls of a prison cell, covered in incomprehensible graffiti

of our own making. We forget that the clues to discovering internal truths—the “who am I”—are often scattered outside of the self.

This brings me to that second inmate, whose cell was not in a French castle but at the United States Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he served time for bank embezzlement during the Great Depression. Over the past few years, I’ve spent a lot of time researching the life of Inmate Number 41010—not because he was a famous man, or even a particularly fascinating one, but because I’ve learned that understanding the self sometimes also requires understanding events I never witnessed and people I never knew—people like Inmate Number 41010, who died long before I was born.

Every family, I suspect, has a silence—a thing that can’t be spoken, a wound that never quite heals from one generation to the next, without anyone ever mentioning the bloodstains. And in my family, that silence, that wound, is the time Inmate Number 41010 spent in Leavenworth. His name is Henry Kaut, and he was my grandfather.

My mother was one day shy of her eighth birthday when her dad was sentenced to prison in 1932. By all indications, he and my grandmother were loving, even doting, parents—but sometimes love causes people to make terrible mistakes. And their terrible mistake was to keep his incarceration a secret from my mother. Hoping to spare her the shame of having a criminal for a father, they decided not to tell her anything about his imprisonment. One day he just disappeared. Nobody told her where or why. She knew, of course, that something was horribly wrong. She could smell her mother’s anxiety and fear. She could see the pitying glances people shot her in her hometown of Downers Grove, Illinois. But no one said a word. Even her closest friends were told by their parents to stay silent. And in that silence, in that darkness, she, too, became a prisoner. As often happens to inmates, time became a blur. Morning after morning after morning the little girl woke up, hoping that this would be the day her daddy would come home.

Eventually he did return, but the experience left its mark on my mother. She stuck around another eight decades—an amazingly productive and rich life—but she never lost a deep fear that the people she

---

loved would suddenly vanish. For my brother and me, it was difficult to grow up with someone with unceasing anxieties about our well-being, someone who constantly convinced herself we would walk out the door and never return. And in my childhood home, as in hers, the problem was only made worse by silence. It was not until I was well into adulthood that I felt able to speak openly with mother about the source of her insecurities, some of which I now saw in myself. But when I asked her for details, I discovered that she knew almost nothing about her father's criminal case or incarceration. All she remembered was the pain.

And so, I slowly came to realize that to make sense of my own story, I would need try to understand a man I never met and a series of events that happened nearly three decades before I was born. My search began at the regional branch of the National Archives on the Southwest Side of Chicago, where, after some digging, I was able to locate the files for *United States vs. Henry M. Kaut*. It has since led me to other archival materials and contemporary newspaper accounts, as well as to a series of interviews with my mother before she died—conversations that seemed to offer her comfort.

I had originally thought the material—more than 100 pages in all—would result in one definitive narrative about my grandfather's time in prison. Isn't that the point of research, after all—to find answers? But instead of a single truth, I've only come upon more and more enigmas. Was Inmate Number 41010 innocent (as my mother went to her death believing) or guilty (as his plea seems to suggest)? Did he act out of desperation? Greed? A misplaced sense of loyalty? Was someone else involved? Why did officers of the bank from which he had just embezzled beg the judge not to send him to jail? Did the suicide of his boss have anything to do with the case? I have not answered any of these questions in a definitive way, but my hunt has made me keenly aware that what really matters is the investigation itself. That's the thing about research—its pursuit often points writers to the “so-what” factor that eludes us when we are working only with experience. I've come to think of this as “outer feeling,” a kind of meaning generated from the outside in, rather than the inside out.

---

Outer feeling allows you to place yourself in history, to see your own story not as an isolated set of experiences and emotions but instead as part of a broader narrative, one you share with other people and other generations. It offers you the possibility, in short, of getting the long view of your own life. *What is it to be a human being? Why do other people behave as they do? Why do I behave as I do?* As Sarah Bakewell points out, these are the essential questions that drove Montaigne (Bakewell, “Montaigne, Philosopher of Life”). They’re also the stuff of outer feeling, the portals that offer an escape from the traps of anecdote into the complex worlds that underlie every story.

And sometimes it’s those underlying worlds that become the story itself. The records of my grandfather’s embezzlement trial, for example, included a 12-page biography of the defendant, documenting his life in considerable detail. This rich cache of information contained a number of storylines that might have interested a genealogist, but the one that fascinated me came from a family history that wasn’t mine. It belonged to my grandfather’s first wife, a woman named Sadie Thorpe, who died in the Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918, two weeks short of her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. For reasons I didn’t understand at first, I became obsessed with this non-ancestor, devoting many hours to researching her short and mostly uneventful life, which had unfolded in obscurity. Then one day, reading through my research for the umpteenth time, I realized why Sadie Thorpe held such sway over my imagination. Between 20 million and 100 million people worldwide perished in the Great Influenza Epidemic, and if she had not been among them, I never would have been born. The essay I eventually wrote about her—published in *New Ohio Review*—is a kind of love letter across time. By saving Sadie Thorpe’s story from oblivion, I found that I could finally start to make sense of my own.

Montaigne could have told me that the search for meaning is full of detours. That’s why, as Bakewell observes, “he usually responded to questions with flurries of further questions and a profusion of anecdotes, often all pointing in different directions and leading to contradictory conclusions. The questions and stories *were* his answers, or further ways of trying the question out” (Bakewell, *How to Live*

11). Perhaps this helps to explain why I've been more comfortable approaching my grandfather's story not through one central narrative but through a number of smaller "attempts," of which this essay is the latest.

I will never, of course, comprehend my grandfather's "inner feelings," much less his actions, nor will I gain a complete understanding of the complex ways his imprisonment affected my mother's fragile eight-year-old self. But unlike that little girl, cut off from the flow of time, I have gained the ability to place my own experiences in a larger narrative. "We embody, if unwittingly and partially, our history, even our prehistory," writes the essayist Patricia Hampl in *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. "The past courses through our veins. The self is the instrument which allows us not only to live this truth but to contemplate it, and thereby to be comforted by meaning—which is simply the awareness of relationship" (Hampl 97).

And for me, this "awareness of relationship" has come through research. I still don't know where the information I've collected about my grandfather will lead me, or even whether my search is at an end. But I do know that because of it, I now find myself in a space that looks less like some barred cell in a penitentiary and more like a room atop of a tower, windows open, fog outside lifting, faint rays of sunlight creeping in.

## Research in Practice

Miles Harvey

Students in my creative nonfiction classes often make passing reference to family legends in their essays. “Rumor has it ...” these anecdotes tend to begin. *Rumor has it that my great-great-grandfather was a moonshiner during Prohibition. ... Rumor has it that my great aunt was an airplane pilot for the Women’s Army Corps in World War II. ... Rumor has it that one of my ancestors fell to his death while puffin-hunting in Iceland.*

“Well,” I’ll ask, “is the rumor true?”

They’ll stare back at me with a mix of confusion and irritation, as if I’ve asked a trick question for which there could be no answer. Yet answers—or at least compelling clues—often do exist, even in the most cryptic cases. (In the puffin-hunting saga, for example, my student was able to dig up an impressive body of evidence.) I’ve come to understand that most of these young essayists would love to find the facts but don’t know where to begin. And I suspect the same is true for many other creative nonfiction writers. Writing workshops often do a superb job in training people how to tell stories—but generally offer little instruction in how to research them. So what follows are a few insights I’ve gained during more than 30 years as a research-focused storyteller.

**The internet got even more amazing in the time it took you to read this sentence.** An estimated 90 percent of the data on the internet has been generated over the past two years (Verhust and Young). For writers, this means that information unavailable to their counterparts ten years ago, five years ago, and sometimes even six months ago, is now readily accessible. While looking into the life of my grandfather, for example, I stumbled upon an announcement in a small-town Indiana newspaper, stating that he’d purchased a marriage license to wed my grandmother. And this tiny notice, it turns out, contains a huge story. It’s dated August 21, 1923—six months before my mother was born.

**Almost nothing is on the internet.** Take, for example, the National Archives, that storehouse of government records where I found the file for my grandfather’s federal embezzlement trial from 1932. According to a 2018 report, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has nearly 235 million pages of records digitized—which might sound impressive until you realize that it totals less than 2 percent of the approximately 12.5 billion pages of documents, photographs, films and other records in analog formats at NARA facilities (National Archives and Records Administration 6). Worse yet, only about 15 percent of those digital records are currently available to the public through the National Archives Catalog. Tracking down my grandfather’s court files, like finding so much other information in the digital age, would not have been possible without digging through dusty old records by hand. And it doesn’t look as though this is going to change anytime soon.

**It helps when somebody broke the law.** My grandfather’s conviction caused untold anguish for his loved ones, especially his eight-year-old daughter. But as I’ve discovered, it also left a priceless paper trail, without which much of my family’s history would have been lost. In my most obsessive moments, I find myself regretting that he took a guilty plea—thus ensuring that there would be no trial, testimony or transcripts.

**The act of interviewing can be transformative.** In decades of conducting interviews, I’ve found that simply placing a audio-recording device between two human beings has a powerful effect, often altering their relationship in surprising ways. During the many hours I spent interviewing my mother near the end of her life, for example, I noticed that she was telling stories she’d never bothered to mention before—no doubt because



---

I'd never bothered to ask. As time went on, we broke out of familiar (and sometimes dysfunctional) patterns of mother-son discourse. She became less guarded, and I found myself viewing her with new eyes: as the fascinating, complex person that she was, someone I didn't know quite as well as I had always assumed.

**Don't take "I don't remember" for an answer.** When interviewed by someone who asks the right questions and pays close attention to the responses, many people can recall far more than they think, even about painful or uncomfortable aspects of their lives that they've mostly put out of their minds. One way to get people to remember an event is to help them to place themselves in the action: *Where were you standing? What were you seeing? What were you doing? What was going through your mind in that moment? How old were you? What was going on in your life at the time?*

**Make timelines.** I'm obsessive about keeping a list of events for each story I'm trying to tell, ordered in the sequence of their occurrence. For my current nonfiction book project, a story about a 19<sup>th</sup>-century prophet who started his own kingdom on U.S. soil, my timeline now totals 175 single-spaced pages. Such representations, I've found, reveal the story's plot, allowing a writer to discover the chain of causality that links events, actions and individuals.

**Genetics tell stories—sometimes unexpected ones.** A good friend of mine recently received an AncestryDNA test kit as a present from her husband. Hoping to get a clearer picture of her roots, she dutifully spit into the little plastic tube and sent it off to the lab. The results, however, contained a stunning revelation about her own parentage. More than 50 years earlier, a young doctor had donated his sperm to a fertility clinic—sperm later used to artificially inseminate my friend's mother. Since both of her parents are now dead, my friend is unsure whether they ever knew the truth—or took the secret with them to their graves. But she has a great story on her hands.

**Be prepared for surprises.** As my friend's story demonstrates, the narratives we seek are often far different from the ones we find. One of my students, for example, set out to write a glowing story about her beloved grandfather, a former bar owner in Chicago. She began by consulting an online newspaper archive—where she was aghast to discover that the old man had once been charged in a brutal murder. The hagiography she had hoped to write was ruined. But as so often happens with research, a far more complex and compelling story was just beginning to let itself be unraveled.

**Be patient and persistent.** The chance of finding all the information you're after in a single archive—an El Dorado of data—is pretty much zero. More often, you'll uncover small fragments of information that lead you to other small fragments, tiny pieces in a huge puzzle. Keep in mind that this puzzle may never form a clear picture—and that even if it does, it may look nothing like the one you hoped to find. But also keep in mind that great creative nonfiction often comes from the sublime act of piecing it all together.

---

Works Cited

- Bakewell, Sarah. *How To Live, Or, A Life Of Montaigne: In One Question And Twenty Attempts At An Answer*. New York: Other Press, 2010. Print.
- “Montaigne, Philosopher of Life, Part 1: How to Live.” *The Guardian*, 10 May 2010.  
[www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/may/10/montaigne-philosophy](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/may/10/montaigne-philosophy).  
Accessed on 27 June 2018.
- Gwartney, Debra. “When the Action is Hot: A Memoirist’s Guide to Writing Cool.” *Poets & Writers*, Jan./Feb. 2013: 23-26. Print.
- Hampl, Patricia. *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. Print.
- Harvey, Miles. “At the Grave of Sadie Thorpe.” *New Ohio Review*, no. 15, Spring 2014: 63-79. Print.
- Kramer, Jane. “Me, Myself and I: What Made Michel de Montaigne the First Modern Man?” *The New Yorker*. 7 Sept. 2009, Literary Lives: 34-41. Print.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *Essays*. Trans. Cohen, J.M. London: Penguin Books, 1958. Print.
- National Archives and Records Administration. “Strategic Plan 2018-2022.” Washington: National Archives, 2018. Print.
- United States v. Henry M. Kaut. “Petition for Probation.” U.S. District Court, Northern Illinois, Eastern Division, March 8, 1932.
- Verhulst, Stefaan G. and Young, Andrew. “How the Data That Internet Companies Collect Can Be Used for the Public Good.” *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*. Web. 23 Jan. 2018.  
<https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-the-data-that-internet-companies-collect-can-be-used-for-the-public-good>