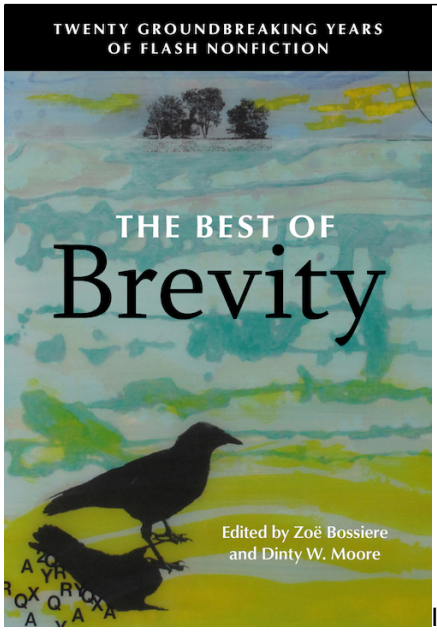
Talking Flash Nonfiction with Brevity [1]

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Interview by Dinty W. Moore

A *Brevity* Roundtable With Past Contributors



I founded the online magazine *Brevity* more than two decades ago, inspired by the flash fiction movement and seeing how the internet—back then we called it the World Wide Web—might create new opportunities for connecting readers with writers. My idea was to focus solely on flash nonfiction, a genre that barely existed at the time.

I think of flash nonfiction in metaphoric terms: like the moment you see a figure illuminated across the street during a brief middle-of-the-night flash of lightning. Though it is a prose form, it shares much with poetry: the concision of language and often the importance of a single image.

To celebrate the release of *The Best of* Brevity*: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction* (Rose Metal Press), I contacted three writers who published in the magazine during its earliest years: Lee Martin, Michael Martone, and Sue William Silverman. We corresponded in the first weeks of September 2020 by email, allowing the four of us to see and respond to the responses of others. All three writers are known for their prize-winning longform works, both memoir and novel, but the allure of the exceedingly short essay held its sway with them both then and now.

The version below has been edited and condensed. For this project, TW partnered with Rose Metal Press to celebrate ***The Best of*** **Brevity.**

DM: **You were a contributor to *Brevity* back in the day, when the genre barely had a profile, much less a clear name or direction. What do you remember about flash nonfiction as a genre in the late 1990s, when the "new"**

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idea of flash fiction had already gained considerable traction but brief essays were still very rare?

Michael Martone: What I remember (and what I still think about today) was that I had very little interest in establishing borders or genres. I was (and am) trying to work the spaces between poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction, narrative and lyric. I wanted (and still want) to create something that can't be named, placed, defined.

I am old enough to have been there at the historic moment that the writer was brought into the university. A heady time. I remember the university saying: Come on in! Bring your energy, your out-of-the-box thinking, your creativity. BUT. Can you give grades? We really need those grades....

I always thought (then and now) my writing needed to resist that institutional desire. If I was going to operate in an ancient scientific sorting machine that is the university, I was never ever going to contribute to the sorting, to a category, to the establishment of a genre. I was going to make things and let the critics all around me decide (and decision is next to incision!) where I fit and what to call it.

Poetry or prose. Fiction or fact. Narrative or lyric. Good or bad. Especially good or bad. I had (and have) no idea (and don't really care) if what I was doing then (or now) is good or bad.

Sue William Silverman: I absolutely love Michael's response. I totally agree with him, and I totally don't! I mean, everything he says makes so much sense, yet, at the same time, I kind of like to know which lane I'm driving in…even if the lane is foggy and a bit crooked.

But here's what I remember: I remember meeting you and then hearing about *Brevity*. So, initially I simply wanted to specifically submit work to you. Additionally, it was a challenge I set for myself. For years, I tended to write long-long books. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, I started writing poetry. But the essay (long or short) seemed elusive. So, for my first essay in *Brevity*, (I'm embarrassed to admit) I lengthened and slightly re-imagined a poem. I cheated!

Yet I knew flash CNF had energy; it was here to stay. I was immediately attracted to it as an idea, a genre, a "thing." I wanted to discover whether *I could even do it,* because I wanted to belong to the club. The *Brevity* piece was also one of the very first essays I ever wrote.

Lee Martin: I started out as a fiction writer, and then I crossed over to creative nonfiction. My second memoir, *Turning Bones*, tried to dissolve the boundaries between fiction and creative nonfiction as I used facts from my paternal family's history to imagine lives for ancestors I never knew. In a sense, then, I'm like Michael *and* Sue. I like to call myself a storyteller, genre be damned, but I also like to think about what the conventions of distinct forms make possible when I write flash creative nonfiction. The compression of the flash invites moves common to the short story and the poem. The thing I love about the form is how much it can hold and express in so few words.

I'd long been a fan of what we were calling in those days "sudden fiction." Robert Shapard and James Thomas had put together their anthology of fiction writers working in this condensed form [*Sudden Fiction*, Gibbs Smith, 2013], and I found the stories useful for talking about craft and technique with my creative writing students. We all tried writing some of this sudden fiction, and I fell in love with its swiftness and precision.

Then, lo and behold, I found out there was this online journal that published small pieces of creative nonfiction, and I thought, well, now there's a challenge. So, like Sue, I wanted to be a part of this 750-words-or-fewer club. I remember reading *Brevity* and thinking to myself, okay, let's see if I can write something like that. I loved the flash essay immediately because it required a poet's attention to image and language while also accommodating the fiction writer's need to tell a good story. It gave me one more form in which to work, and what an elastic form it turned out to be.

DM: **Of course, Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones laid the groundwork for flash nonfiction—though they didn't call it that—even before I started *Brevity*. The first of their anthologies, *In Short*, came out in 1996, allowing what seems in retrospect an exceedingly generous 2,000 words. *Brevity* holds writers to 750 words or fewer, a limit that two of you characterize above as a daunting but appealing challenge. What, if anything, have you discovered about what is possible in such a small prose package? Have you been surprised where the**

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form has led you?

Martone: Daunting? Not so much. Necessary, yes. The size of the grain of sand to make the pearl. I immediately thought of ways to cheat. One hundred words, you say? There is never any mention of the words of the title counting or not. So I always use very long titles. In 1986, my entry for Jerome Stern's The World's Greatest Short Short Story Contest (250 words) was titled "The Mayor of the Sister City Speaks to the Chamber of Commerce of Klamath Falls, Oregon."

I always use hyphenated words as well as much as I can, as two or three words can "count" as one. This goad of brevity led me eventually to write a chapbook called *Memoranda* made up of brief "hint" prose pieces that were 25 words or fewer BUT with titles that are always 35 words or more, aiming for a total word count of 50 most of the time.

What the word count prompt did was to force me to reconsider the other conventions not discussed—titles are "brief," are "short"—and what is a title? What work does the title do? What if the title was always already the brief prose poem or short short that was always already attached to the regular-sized story or essay? For me, now the action was all taking place in the title.

This kind of thing—I know—gets dismissed as "experimental" writing. I never thought of myself as an "experimental" writer—coming up with new concoctions—but as a "formalist" who needs to know all the forms, inside and out, and how to take conventions and forms and defamiliarize them and recontextualize them, avoiding, as I said before, ever being pinned down.

Martin: It seems to me that anything is possible within flash creative nonfiction. You want to tell a story? You can do that. You want to work with image and metaphor? You can do that. Personal essay? Check. Nature Writing? Check. *In Short* has great examples of most of the sub-forms of the genre. Maybe you want to explode the form and see if you can turn it into something else, maybe something more fragmented, or, as Michael says, something folks might call “experimental.” The flash form of creative nonfiction is the welcome table for writers. Y'all come!

With my own work, I was surprised by how the form invited me to experiment with voice. For some reason, the flash form often invites me to use what I call a communal or a collective voice, which becomes a combination of something that sounds a bit like me speaking from a particular persona and the voices of a specific locale—its people, its institutions, its popular culture, its social values and attitudes.

I strive for a texture of sounds, and those sounds are sometimes in opposition to one another. Different tones and personas competing for precious space in something so brief creates an interesting tension and lends a note of urgency to the writing. This competition between the individual and the group can create a call and response. Often in the process, competing sensibilities clarify and define one another. The voice of one of my personas meets the voice of a community, and an energy rises that might not be there otherwise. This means of exploring experiential material has been something the flash form has allowed me to work with in ways that have also proved useful to my fiction.

Silverman: Before I began writing essays in general and flash creative nonfiction in particular, my writing was very straightforward. My first two memoirs, for example, have straight narrative arcs. While I implement reflection and flashback, of course, I nevertheless envisioned that writing, at its core, was traditional storytelling. Nothing inventive or experimental for me! I’m quite sure my thinking, back then, would qualify as rigid.

Growing up, I loved reading long novels, the longer the better. For example, I began reading all the Russian novelists in, like, seventh grade. I was happiest settling in for the long haul. So that’s my pre-writing literary background.

In many ways, therefore, I’m surprised by how readily I abandoned my first love and embraced other literary visions. Mainly, I had to evolve as a writer. For one thing, I didn’t “have” any more straight-through narratives in me after I wrote those first two memoirs. If I wanted to continue as a writer, I had to branch out. And once I did, I loved it. I was hooked. My two most recent books are essay collections and, by now, I’ve published four essays in *Brevity*.

I agree with Lee that anything is possible in flash. It has pushed me to experiment not only with form but also voice. I’m able to push the boundary of irony to its farthest reaches of pure detachment as it disturbs and intrudes on an

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otherwise straight narrative. Yet, *ironically*, it also artistically showcases life by implementing unusual perspectives.

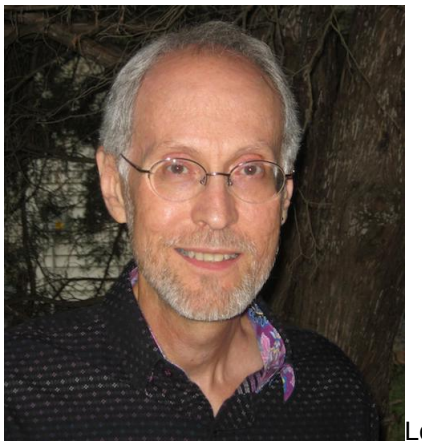
By stepping away from traditional narrative, I observe experience from new or different angles. In flash CNF, I can display the uniqueness of a theme that's previously been only traditionally explored. It frees my consciousness in order to enter new portals; it illuminates diverse and altered worlds. I'd never before heard the voice I use in my most recent piece in *Brevity*, "Your Personal Prescription Information." It's not a voice that could be sustained in a long essay or memoir. But it seems perfect for flash. And I loved discovering I had that voice inside me. It was simply waiting to "speak."

DM: **So, for my final question, in the spirit of the flash form, I'm going to impose a draconian word limit on the three of you. In 25 words or fewer, have you taught the brief essay form to your students over the years, and if so, what was the best direction you could offer them?**

Silverman: Yes. Make the title "work" like that of a poem. No prescriptive titles. Find a metaphoric title that sheds light on and deepens the theme.

Martone: No. Not by itself. Instead I teach collage, segmented prose. Individual sections work as both part of the larger piece or as stand-alone essays.

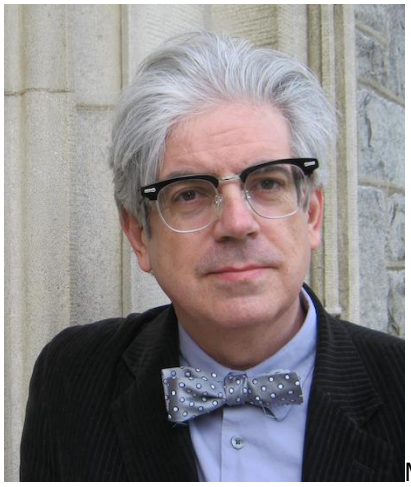
Martin: Yes. Pay close attention to the way compression creates the turn at the end of an essay, the one where something rises that resonates.

Lee Martin is the Pulitzer Prize finalist author of *The Bright Forever* (Shaye Areheart Books, 2005) and four other novels: *Quakertown* (Dutton Adult, 2001), *River of Heaven* (Shaye Areheart Books, 2008), *Break the Skin* (Crown, 2011), and *Late One Night* (Dzanc Books, 2017). His other books include three memoirs, two short story collections, and *Telling Stories: The Craft of Narrative and the Writing Life* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

For more information, visit Lee Martin's website [5].

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Michael Martone's most recent books are *The Complete Writings of Art Smith, the Bird Boy of Fort Wayne* (BOA Editions, Ltd.), *Brooding* (University of Georgia Press, 2018), *The Moon Over Wapakoneta* (Fiction Collective 2, 2018), and *Memoranda* (Bull City Press, 2015). His stories and essays have appeared in *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Story*, *Antaeus*, *North American Review*, *Benzene*, *Epoch*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Iowa Review*, *Third Coast*, *Shenandoah*, *Bomb*, and other magazines.

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Sue William Silverman is the author of *How to Survive Death and Other Inconveniences* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), *The Pat Boone Fan Club* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (University of Georgia Press, 1996), and *Love Sick* (Norton, 2001), the craft book *Fearless Confessions* (University of Georgia Press, 2009), and several poetry collections.

For more information, visit Sue William Silverman's website [6].

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Dinty W. Moore is author of the memoirs *Between Panic and Desire* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008) and *Dear Mister Essay Writer Guy* (Ten Speed Press, 2015) and is co-editor with Zoë Bossiere of *The Best of* Brevity*: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction* (Rose Metal Press, 2020). He has published essays and stories in the *Georgia Review*, *Harper's*, *New York Times Magazine*, and elsewhere. He founded *Brevity* [7] in 1997 and continues as editor-in-chief.

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