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INTERVIEW WITH NICOLE WALKER

Nicole Walker's *Quench Your Thirst with Salt* won the 2011 Zone 3 Award for creative nonfiction and was released in June 2013. She is the author of a collection of poems, *This Noisy Egg* (Barrow Street, 2010). She edited, with Margot Singer, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, (Bloomsbury, 2013) and with Rebecca Campbell—*7 Artists, 7 Rings—an Artist's Game of Telephone* for the *Huffington Post*. She's nonfiction editor at *Diagram* and associate professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

INSCAPE: It seems to me based on some of your comments about your work that genre has been something you've cared about for a long time. You're the co-editor of a book called *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, which is a rather extensive investigation on genre—I'm wondering if you can talk about the anxiety of genre and the ethics of genre, specifically within the nonfiction camp.

NICOLE WALKER: That's such a great question because, on the one hand, I don't care about genre at all. I think, "Oh, good writing is good writing." But on the other hand I think—because I am a teacher, primarily—when you try to talk about good writing, you automatically need some sort of conventional assumption to understand how to help this person better shape their writing. So although I think it would be great if we could all just write buckets

of prose or buckets of poetry—again, I’m already genre-fying—buckets of words, I think people feel like they need some sort of keeper of those words, some way to shape them that makes them knowable. So within genre, even within nonfiction, I think there are conventions that we expect. And I don’t think that you should necessarily adhere to them, but at least we can talk about them. In my nonfiction class I say that nonfiction uses white space—but does it use white space in the same way that poetry uses white space? It uses scene, it uses narrative, it uses dialogue; does it use it in the same way as fiction? And what does nonfiction do that is different than either poetry or fiction? What are some of its options? I think some of it might be the argument or the polemic—what is much more a subtext, usually, in poetry or fiction, becomes much more raised to the surface. I love that you can sort of fight with yourself inside and on the surface of the essay, you can make the fight part of the aesthetic of the piece, which is really captivating to me. So what I was saying about poetry being so aestheticized in a lot of ways, you can bring that aesthetic into an essay but also talk about the aesthetic right in front of people. I think there’s a lot less hidden in this than in poetry, for example, and I love the way the essay exposes.

In the collection of essays on nonfiction that I edited with Margot Singer, *Bending Genre*, we wanted to go beyond this constant argument of how “truth-filled” nonfiction has to be. My argument is that it has to be as truth-filled as the essay claims it’s going to be. I spend a lot of time talking about John D’Agata’s book *About a Mountain*, and my argument is that he’s always playing with numbers, talking about how much Yucca Mountain is going to

cost to bury nuclear waste there, but he sets you up to be suspicious of numbers right off the bat. Numbers are as malleable as anything because you think there are things like facts. And then he has a fight with *The Believer* magazine about numbers. You're like-- that's part of the point of that book! It's not the point of all books. In some books of nonfiction you can trust the numbers. But John D'Agata says right off the bat that in his, you can't. So my thinking is that the convention that you're using, the way that you're using conventions from nonfiction, tips your reader off to know how much to believe in. Lauren Slater's book is called *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, and you probably think right off the bat there's going to be some fishy stuff going on. But when people like Cheryl Strayed wrote her book *Wild*, there's nothing in that book that suggests that it's anything but the truth and there's no reason to worry about it. So, to me, it's a combination of trying to figure out what the conventions of this nonfiction genre are so you can use them to tell a certain kind of truth, and then to tell your reader which kind of truth you're telling them.

INSCAPE: Your book entitled *Quench Your Thirst with Salt* concerns itself quite predominantly with land, with place, Utah, Salt Lake City... I'm wondering if you can talk about the role of land and place in writing, and maybe your writing in particular. Is there something about the written word that lends itself nicely to a conveyance of place

NW: Going back to my teaching, when I start to read my students' work--my undergraduate students in an introductory class--they just

start telling me about how their heart got broken or about their grandmother who died. It's always emotional outpouring, but it doesn't exist yet, for me, because it's not put in a place. I think place is the second thing you need to even begin to tell a story. The first thing you need is a body, and that's where I think voice comes in and a person in character— all those things. I think a body is the primary thing you need. But then you need to put that body in a place. So I think it's natural, with the conventions of writing across all genres, to say, "You need to be able to imagine this person sitting somewhere, doing something." And then you start to contextualize. What is that person doing, and why are they sitting there, and what are they sitting on, and where did this wood bench come from? You can then ask all kinds of questions: you can talk about the labor of who built this bench, you can talk about the trees that were used to make it, you can talk about the aesthetic dimension of putting wood everywhere, what does that mean, what does that convey socially? Just by examining where you are, you can ask a lot of bigger questions. That, I think, is when your writing starts to have meaning. When you start investigating the self—that's the body—and the place that it's in, you can start to really answer questions about why we are here and what are we doing and how did we get this way

INSCAPE: Which is the primary thrust of an essay.

NW: Yes. And all writing, in some ways.