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Contemporary Sports Writing in Creative Non-fiction: A Study of Madeleine Blais' In These Girls, HopeIs a Muscle, H.G. Bissinger's Friday Night Lights, and Tim Keown's Skyline

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Chapter One: Introduction

I am always fascinated by the elements of fiction in journalism, the lifelike details in an account that are not (as in fiction) like life, but life itself. It is one of the most powerful forces in journalism, the power of what is real. Some people make what I consider a false distinction between journalism and fiction. It is often assumed that the principal job of non-fiction is to convey information and the principal job of fiction is to convey life. Novelist Pat Conroy once said that in our society, journalists are the ‘designated watchers’ and novelists, the ‘designated feelers.’ My favorite journalism and fiction are in fact the kinds that do both.

Gay Talese

Gay Talese, a “new journalist” of the 1960s, could not have realized that his “favorite journalism and fiction . . . the kinds that do both,” would come to be recognized as works of creative nonfiction in the 1990s.1 The genre of creative non-fiction that grew from new journalism has finally been realized as a significant and legitimate form of literature in recent years. “Creative non-fiction is becoming recognized as a legitimate verbal endeavor,” said Madeleine Blais, author of In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle at a reading of her book in February. Creative non-fiction has finally come to be treated
respectfully as a true and artistic literary tool, Blais said. "You don't just have to be a poet anymore," she added. However, there is still not an official definition of the genre. Arriving at a definition, therefore, must involve combining elements from a wide variety of critics, scholars and authors. Creative non-fiction, the "new journalism" of the 1990s, can only be read and studied properly if the reader recognizes what she is reading is creative non-fiction, and this can happen only with a fair and accurate definition.

Creative non-fiction can best be defined as a delicate balance between an author's artfulness and creativity and her dedication to fact. The basic characteristics of creative non-fiction fall into two categories: journalistic techniques and fictional techniques. Journalistic methods ensure the accuracy necessary to non-fiction writing, while fictional techniques evoke the reader's emotions. Of the journalistic techniques, the three most important are immersion, third-person point of view, and status details. Of the fictional techniques, the major four are characterization, the use of figures of speech, a sense of the author's personal style, and the portrayal of events in dramatic scenes. Creative non-fiction uses the techniques of the news reporter in the pre-writing stages and the techniques of the novelist in the actual writing. The result is a dramatic true story that is as involving and captivating as the best novel.

Creative non-fiction excludes travel memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs of any kind, self-help books and most anything that can better be defined as another genre. Some authors use the term creative non-fiction as an umbrella term for most of these genres, and would label the works in this study literary journalism, a sub-genre of creative non-fiction. In an emerging field, inconsistencies such as these are
inevitable, but they are also fairly inconsequential. The confusion over terminology simply shows that recognition of the genre is lagging slightly behind its development. More importantly, it has become obvious that a new genre has developed.

Scholars today generally agree on the key elements that creative non-fiction authors use to develop their works. Critic Norman Sims, University of Massachusetts journalism department chairperson, cites “immersion, voice, accuracy, symbolism” in his 1990 book (4) as four main criteria of creative non-fiction, and critic Barbara Lounsberry’s 1990 four-stage definition of creative non-fiction is similar: “Documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to ‘invented’ from the writer’s mind . . . Exhaustive research . . . The Scene . . . Fine Writing: A Literary Prose Style” (xiii-xv). Sims and Lounsberry represent many others who make similar observations in accord with their criteria and the definition presented here. A tight definition may seem restrictive, but in fact such a definition is necessary in order to eliminate any chance of inaccuracy, such as Truman Capote’s 1965 In Cold Blood which failed to stand up to the accuracy demanded by creative non-fiction. Only a restrictive definition allows the works which meet it to be studied with confidence that they are indeed non-fiction.

Ironically, one of the most characterizing aspects of creative non-fiction is that it is almost impossible for critics to agree on its characteristics. Both the terminology and the definition of creative non-fiction have been so elusive that nearly every critic has been forced to make up her own definition, although most scholars would agree on the key elements of the definition. Most 1990s critics agree that being factual is a must, and therefore regard Capote’s In Cold Blood as a work of fiction (or a failed attempt at non-
fiction), but even the necessity of being factual is debated. Scholar John Russell wrote in 1990, "Granted that accurate data must make up the ground-plan, can a different principle, governing truth of meaning, allow for lapses in the very accuracy supposed to bond writer and reader? The answer is Yes. Strict truth may—practically must—be departed from and still the literary work need not be marred" (415). Russell classifies essays, memoirs and travel writings as creative non-fiction, including anything that is both creative and non-fiction as creative non-fiction (414). This definition is much too loose. Just as fifth-graders learn that a boy who is your friend is not necessarily your boyfriend, something that is both creative and non-fiction is not necessarily a work of creative non-fiction. In reaction to the accuracy problems with new journalism works such as In Cold Blood, writers of creative non-fiction in the 1980s and 1990s became more careful and therefore less subjective with the truth.

John Hellmann of Kent State University, author of the 1981 Fables of Fact, points out that creative non-fiction is primarily aesthetic, emphasizing the literary value more than the journalistic value of creative non-fiction. The purpose of creative non-fiction authors, Hellmann argues, is to create works of primarily literary, not journalistic, significance. Other scholars disagree. Chris Anderson, an assistant professor of English at Oregon State University, wrote in 1989 that "journalism, or the 'new journalism,' is informative rather than reflective; its main purpose is to convey information" (x). The term "creative non-fiction" is actually used to emphasize the fact that the genre is a cross-section of two different genres, implying that each half of the term deserves equal weight: aesthetics and information should be equally important to creative non-fiction authors.
This combination of art and information makes creative non-fiction a unique genre. Writers of fiction often scorn journalists, and journalists often scorn fiction writers, but creative non-fiction authors pull the two poles together.

The journalist and fiction writer come together in this study of three works from the 1990s and these works become the lenses through which critics explore the definition of creative non-fiction. Madeleine Blais’ *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle*, Tim Keown’s *Skyline* and H.G. Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights* set the standard for sports creative non-fiction. They are excellent examples of creative non-fiction. *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle* and *Skyline* are both creative non-fiction accounts of high school basketball teams. *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle* is an account of a girls’ 1992-93 basketball season in Amherst, Massachusetts, while *Skyline* traces the same 1992-93 season of an inner-city Oakland boys’ team. *Friday Night Lights* is the story of a small-town high school football team in Texas. All three books set about to accomplish similar tasks: to chronicle one specific season of one specific high school team. The tone, the missions, and even the audiences of the three books, however, are distinctly different. The books follow the most rigid of creative non-fiction guidelines and set the standard for creative sports non-fiction in the ’90s. Works that set precedents are necessary in the establishment of all genres, but it is especially important in creative non-fiction to have good examples to follow because of the precarious nature of balancing fact and creativity in meeting the definition and in serving the audience. These three works set those precedents well and point in a direction for sports creative non-fiction that clearly define the genre of creative non-fiction and give future writers powerful models to follow.
Athletic pursuits are natural subject choices for creative non-fiction authors because of the built-in plot, conflict, drama, and room for characterization. Sports writing can easily serve both purposes of information and aesthetics required of the creative non-fiction definition. Accounts of sports stories convey information to a large audience, and they provide the forum necessary for artistry as well. The most successful writing depends on capturing human drama—and sports writing is one subject which allows authors to capture that drama particularly well.

It is not surprising that Blais, Bissinger, and Keown decided to use creative non-fiction to tell their stories—what is surprising is that few others have. The effects of these three works prove that other authors could successfully follow the same path. With non-fiction steadily rising in popularity, it is likely that other authors will follow the precedent Bissinger, Blais and Keown have set. According to the second bibliographical study by Dennis Rygiel on literary non-fiction for the years 1980-1988, new journalism increased in popularity seven times from the 1960s to the ’80s, while non-fiction in general tripled (567). The recent trend toward non-fiction, contends critic Chris Anderson, editor of an 1989 collection of literary non-fiction, reflects “the modern demand for the narration of fact. . . . From this perspective the critical issue extends beyond the intrinsic literary merit of non-fiction prose; the more important question is the role of non-fiction as a form in the cultural and ethical debate of our time” (3). Just as society in the ’60s demanded non-fiction to explain the complexities of the era, today’s society issues the same demand.
Chapter Two: Creative Non-fiction in Its Historical Context

The term creative non-fiction is new, but Lounsberry contends that the genre itself is only relatively new. For many centuries, Lounsberry says, non-fiction was the genre of choice. And with such authors as Michel de Montaigne, Robert Burton, Sir Thomas Browne, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Macaulay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and John Ruskin, much of the non-fiction writing in that era was creative. Although these authors’ writings might not fit today’s standards exactly, Anthony Burgess points out that creative non-fiction is not without its roots: “[Norman] Mailer is using a very much earlier technique than anything the 20th Century has discovered--the technique of Daniel Defoe, of either presenting reality in the form of a novel or presenting the materials of a novel in the form of reality” (qtd. in Lounsberry 76).

Even though most of the earlier authors’ writings could better fit into other genres such as essays, memoirs or nature sketches, some of the early journalists wrote newspaper articles that Thomas Connery argues in his 1984 doctoral dissertation for Brown University are the roots of contemporary creative non-fiction. Between 1870 and 1900, reporters came to be known for their writing skills as well as their news gathering skills (4). Human interest stories became a prominent part of the Sunday paper, and “color” was valued by editors. Reporters were even encouraged to include “nonessentials,” details and description, to make their stories more interesting (5). At the same time, fiction writing was becoming more realistic, making it inevitable that the two would merge somewhere in the middle (5). It took several decades for this to happen, and in the
1930s there were “significant intersections of journalism and fiction” in works such as Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* (266). Even though today’s journalists may not set out intentionally to emulate their ancestors, their methods and approaches are often similar (313).

Sport has rarely been the subject choice of creative non-fiction authors. Rather, authors in this genre tended to focus on the social and political climates, often unfamiliar to the middle class. Critic John Hollowell, who wrote a study of the new journalism and the non-fiction novel in 1977, defined four main categories the subjects often fell into: celebrities and personalities, the youth subculture and the still-evolving “new cultural patterns,” the “big” event, often violent or anti-war protest, and general social and political reporting (40). When sports was the subject, it usually fell under the first category, such as author John McPhee’s 1965 *A Sense of Where You Are*, an account of Princeton University basketball star Bill Bradley. McPhee’s work is one of few from the 1960s that closely resembles the sports non-fiction of the 1990s, although McPhee himself is much more a part of the work than contemporary writers are.

In some ways, the birth of creative non-fiction has followed the course of other genres of literature, particularly the novel (Wolfe 37). Henry Fielding had trouble trying to describe a novel in the 19th century and finally described *Tom Jones* as a “comic epic-poem in prose,” just as today’s critics and authors refer to creative non-fiction as “faction,” or, as W. Ross Winterowd, author of the 1990 *The Rhetoric of the “Other” Literature*, concedes, “I have been preoccupied with the question of terminology, and finally... I have decided merely to surrender” (ix). Creative non-fiction was born with
the new journalism, but was not given the name “creative non-fiction” until 25 years later.

New journalism, or literary journalism, took hold when both Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote published novel-length works of new journalism in 1965. Wolfe published a collection of his work, *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, and Capote finished *In Cold Blood* that year, and consequently many critics cite 1965 as the beginning of “new journalism.” In the late 1960s new journalism had a sizable following and it was definitely a distinct form of journalism. New journalism broke away from conventional journalism with its interpretative and innovative approaches: “In sharp contrast to the ‘objectivity’ that the reporter strives for in the standard news article, the voice of the new journalist is frankly subjective; it bears the stamp of his personality” (Hellmann 22). Creative non-fiction could never have come about without its new journalism predecessor: new journalism is the root of creative non-fiction. “New journalism is new for the same basic reasons that contemporary fiction is new. Both were forced by an implausible reality into radical breaks with the traditional author-reader contract” (Hellmann 19). In other words, a changing society caused both journalists and fiction authors to find new methods to approach their readers.

Most critics agree that the new journalism of the 1960s arose in response to the social need of the time. John F. Kennedy’s assassination, a perceived rise in violence, and a general sense of chaos and change contributed to a greater need for meaning and understanding in the media (Hellmann 3). The conventional method in news stories of offering only the basic facts was no longer enough to satisfy an audience so confused by
society that the facts themselves needed explanation (Hellmann 3). Everette E. Dennis, of Kansas State University, and William L. Rivers, of Stanford University, agreed in 1974 that “the new journalism is complicated, a wild mixture of styles, forms, and purposes that defies simple definitions so completely that it can be summarized only in the most general way: dissatisfaction with existing standards and values” (1). New journalists saw the confusion in society, perhaps even experienced this confusion themselves, and sought to fill the need for discussion and explanation of that confusion (Winterowd 57).

Although the rise of new journalism was in large part due to the perceived weaknesses in conventional journalism, at the same time there was another driving force leading to new journalism: perceived weaknesses in conventional literature (Hellmann 8). Reality had become so unreal that fiction writers were driven to two extremes: allegory and black humor, or factual writing which used unconventional methods (Hellmann 11). Because people had a hard time believing anything which was supposed to represent reality in the 1960s, writers assured readers that what they were reading was either pure fantasy (such as Thomas Pynchon’s V) or pure fact (such as Tom Wolfe’s Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby) (Hellmann 11). Unlike the way in which people stopped believing realistic fiction, people would be willing to believe what the authors had to say because these authors were not trying to impose their ideas about reality on anyone—everything the new journalists wrote was completely factual and everything the fabulist fiction authors wrote was completely surreal:

The non-fiction novel and fabulation are radical forms which take their impetus from an extreme reaction to the world we live in. . . . The assumption
behind such experiments is that our 'reality' is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate. (Hellmann 10)

The new journalism not only filled the gap caused by the limits of conventional journalism, but those caused by the limits of conventional fiction as well.

Another factor which allowed the art form of new journalism to develop was the changing perception of art itself (Smart 13). Traditional conceptions of art did not include non-fiction writing: “the ‘non-fiction novel’ is the result of the failure of the imagination of the literary artist to transubstantiate the ‘raw materials’ of life into the finished work of art” (Barzun 6). Fortunately, non-fiction has now been accepted as a valuable category (Smart 14).

Tom Wolfe, known as the “Father of New Journalism” (Hammer 1) because he was the most visible and controversial leader of the new journalism, made several premature claims to greatness for the new journalism, writing in the introduction to his 1973 book, The New Journalism, that the new journalism was “causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century. . . . the novelists are all out there right now ransacking the literary histories and sweating it out, wondering where they stand. Damn it all, Saul, the Huns have arrived . . .” (Wolfe 3). The new journalists did not dethrone the novelists, but they did influence traditional journalism both in terms of technique and reporting (Wolfe 21). Yet 20 years later Wolfe was a little less certain about the strength of his earlier convictions, even regretting his decision to publish The New Journalism
because he thought he had defined too many rules in the book, cutting out the originality and "freshness" of the new journalism. In an interview with Wolfe conducted by Steve Hammer and available on the World Wide Web, Wolfe admits that "There was a great deal of spontaneity and there was never the sense that it was something to live up to. That was the charm. Once you have standards and rules, it ceases to be as much fun" (5). Without standards and rules, however, writing usually ceases to be non-fiction. Truman Capote's claim to the non-fiction novel on the dust jacket of *In Cold Blood*, which describes the work as a contribution to the field of non-fiction novels, is actually false, because *In Cold Blood* can only be described as a traditional realistic novel (Smart 13-14.)

Debate and criticism over the new journalism were heavy in the 1960s because many conventional journalists felt threatened by such radical changes from traditional news writing. One of the most common reactions during the course of the first nine years of new journalism was that the new journalists were making up their stories and passing them off as real: "The bastards are making it up!" (Wolfe 11). These criticisms of new journalism by traditional journalists, compiled by Dennis and Rivers in 1974, were some of the most common criticisms at that time. They serve to show how creative non-fiction differs from new journalism in that it has gone back to some of the more traditional journalistic methods, and it has broken away from others. The first criticism, "the conventional journalist's aversion to blending fact and opinion, coupled with his aversion to including himself in his article" (Dennis 16), is similar to the thinking of today's creative non-fiction authors in that today's authors strive to use third-person voice as
much as possible so that the author does not become a character. Another criticism, “the new journalist’s seeming disregard for accuracy and his penchant for spoofing” (Dennis 18), is also a belief held by authors of creative non-fiction who have become more aligned with the conventional ideals of accuracy than the original new journalists were. But the ideas that “the journalist’s belief that description, especially applied to people, is subjective and thus taboo” and “the journalist’s fear that stylistic devices will confuse and mislead the reader” (Dennis 17) are disregarded by modern creative non-fiction authors. Creative non-fiction authors and new journalists have proven the worth of description and stylistic devices; indeed, it is something authors strive to do in order to dispel confusion with society. Contemporary creative non-fiction, then, is an extension of new journalism, but it also combines the best of traditional journalism and corrects the mistakes of the original new journalists.

The 1990s definition of creative non-fiction differs from its predecessor, although some of the characteristics are similar. In the ’60s Wolfe described four narrative devices of the new journalism, to which Hellmann added two that were also common at the time: portraying events in dramatic scenes rather than the historical summary of newspapers, recording dialogue fully rather than with the occasional quotations or anecdotes of conventional journalism, recording “status details” or “the pattern of behavior and possessions through which people experience their position in the world.” These are all similar to creative non-fiction techniques, but the last three would not fit into a contemporary definition of creative non-fiction: using point of view in complex and inventive ways to depict events as they unfold, using interior monologue (character’s
words or thoughts in the first person) (Hollowell 25), and using composite characterization, or the creation of “a person who represents a whole class of subjects” (Hollowell 30). Complex point of view and composite characterization are avoided by creative non-fiction authors; however, the rest of the techniques are similar to the journalistic and fictional techniques of creative non-fiction.

Creative non-fiction of the 1990s is the work of a generation of journalists who grew up reading Wolfe, Capote and New York Times reporter Talese as their role models. These younger writers learned from reading the innovations of the 1960s: “Today’s literary journalists clearly understand the difference between fact and falsehood, but they don’t buy into the traditional distinctions between literature and journalism” (Sims 5). Some of these “new” new journalists grew up reading “new journalism” and imitating it— but they gradually changed their approach as they learned from their predecessors. The younger generation is more concerned with voice and less concerned with interjecting the “self” into their prose (Sims 6). In fact, today’s journalists are more concerned with staying out of the story than with putting themselves inside it. Although creative non-fiction is not identical to new journalism, the new journalists of the 1960s still serve as icons for today’s creative non-fiction authors.
Chapter Three: Journalistic Techniques

Just as in journalism, there is no room in creative non-fiction for inaccuracy. Joseph Pulitzer, for whom the most prestigious award in journalism is named, was also known for demanding “accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.” Every detail of the creative non-fiction work must be accurate, just as every detail in a news story must be accurate. Authors who use techniques based on traditional journalistic procedures including the three most important techniques—intense background research (called “immersion” in creative non-fiction), maintaining third person point of view, and using “status details” (material signs that function as symbols of one’s place in society)—ensure that their work remains accurate. Using these techniques also sets the stage for the author to create a work that reads more like a novel than a biography (Winterowd 19). In all works of creative non-fiction, the reader has to rely on the author’s integrity to some extent for the accuracy of the story, but these techniques provide a framework which ensures some degree of objectivity. Without the techniques, the author would be forced to resort to subjectivity because fundamental structure, such as detailed research, would be missing.

Russell pointed out that this kind of creative non-fiction writing is different from writing in daily journalism: “The best non-fiction novels can be depended on for their candour in the re-creation of memory. . . . Its knowledge is drawn from a deep reservoir, as opposed to the kind of data-recovery a reporter may depend on for quick packaging and dissemination” (419). All three works depend on deep reservoirs of information obtained through the authors’ immersion experiences: “You can do all the novelist can do—you just have to do a hell of a lot of research” (Talese qtd. in Weber 110). Like most
of the journalistic techniques employed by creative non-fiction authors, immersion is simply a more in-depth form of the background research journalists do. Although Russell incorrectly suggests that reporters have little need for background research, he is correct in asserting that writers of longer works rely on “deep reservoirs” of information.

In creative non-fiction, immersion, or what Tom Wolfe calls saturation reporting, means enveloping oneself in the subject of the story—basically living out the story. Sims claims that immersion brings about “the journalism of everyday life,” and is a necessary component of creative non-fiction. Even for shorter works, Sims points out, huge time commitments from authors are necessary. When Richard West wrote an article about a New York restaurant for New York magazine he spent a month alternating day and night shifts at the restaurant: “He inhaled the air of the kitchens, thick with steam and cooking aromas, and of the dining rooms, heavy with cigar smoke and status . . . . ‘You just become part of the woodwork until they open up and do things in front of you,’ West said” (Sims 12).5

In no other form of literature is this kind of extensive reporting and research so common—and so vital. In sports creative non-fiction, immersion usually involves the author spending an entire season with the team. In the prologue to Friday Night Lights, Bissinger, who worked at the Philadelphia Inquirer for seven years, talks about his experience with the Permian Panthers: “I was with them through every practice, every meeting, every game, to chronicle the highs and lows of being a high school football player in a town such as this. I went to school with them, and home with them, and rattlesnake hunting with them, and to church with them, because I was interested in
portraying them as more than just football players, and also because I liked them” (xiii). Bissinger also talked to hundreds of people about the town, and his 350-page book invites the reader to discover what he learned from his immersion experience. *Friday Night Lights* chronicles a small Texas town, Odessa, and its values concerning politics and race and education as well as its football team: “Much of what I learned about the town came from these interviews, but some of it naturally came from the personal experience of living there, with a wife and five-year-old twin boys” (xiii). All three authors lived in the towns they were writing about, and Bissinger actually moved to Odessa for the sole purpose of writing *Friday Night Lights*. His book includes more of his immersion experience than the other two do, making it easy to see the depth of reporting that immersion requires.

Because *Friday Night Lights* covers such a broad base, Bissinger’s details are different from Blais’ and Keown’s. The details are not as minute, but their diversity and precise suitability show how much digging Bissinger did to get them. Bissinger’s book is full of anecdotes compiled from living in the community he writes about. Without living in Odessa and immersing himself in the culture, Bissinger would never have had such a complete understanding of every aspect of the town, including its unique language. In a chapter called “Black and White,” Bissinger relates a story about “The Nigger Lady” (89). A man refers to a woman in front of the Odessa City Council as a “nigger lady,” causing city council members to act only slightly embarrassed. “The term ‘nigger’ poured out in Odessa as easily as the torrents of rain that ran down the streets after an occasional storm. . . . Some people looked tall, some looked short, and some looked nigger” (89).
Bissinger describes the different ways the word is used, devoting four pages of text to the subject. Immersion provided Bissinger with the understanding he needed in order to include specific scenes that would give the reader an accurate understanding of Odessa.

Blais also had the opportunity to witness many telling scenes in her immersion experience in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she teaches at the University of Massachusetts. Blais, a former journalist who published many feature stories in the Miami Herald in the 1980s, wrote *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle* after she wrote an article about the Amherst Hurricanes, the 1993 Massachusetts girls' state basketball champions, for the *New York Times Magazine.* Because of that first article, Blais received phone calls from about 15 different publishers asking her to lengthen the story into a book (book reading). Blais began expanding the article after the Hurricanes won the state tournament, writing a novel-length work of creative non-fiction. The effects of immersion, including accuracy, the author's understanding of the subject matter and prose that reads like a novel, are obvious in her work.

The attention to detail that results from immersion is unique to creative non-fiction. When Blais wanted to write about what one of her characters ate for dinner, Blais could not simply imagine the meal. She had to investigate that detail to find out that dinner was "a pot of soup, lentil tonight, which they could eat plain or gussy up with slivers of cheese or slices of meat" (203). Attention to minute details like these is crucial to creative non-fiction, although finding them through immersion is time-consuming for the author. This detail makes the prose come alive: the more attention to minute factual detail, the more the story reads like a work of artistic literature than a news story where
there is not room or time for such detail.

Obviously, Blais spent huge amounts of time immersed in the Hurricanes and their season. After growing up a “sports virgin” during the 1950s when girls’ sports were limited to mere spectacles such as synchronized swimming shows known as “Swimphonies” (3), Blais found it completely foreign to spend months with a winning girls’ high school basketball team. Without this process of living vicariously through the Hurricanes, Blais would not have been able to write as knowledgeably about the game as she does throughout the book: “Jamila stole the ball, pushing it down court in a three-on-one break, made a no-look pass to Jen, who just as quickly fired the ball across the lane to Kathleen for an uncontested layup” (253). For Blais, as for many authors, her immersion experience was also a learning experience—she learned almost everything she knows about basketball from her time spent with the Hurricanes.

Keown’s experience in doing the research for Skyline was similarly educational. After attending almost every Skyline basketball practice and game during the 1992-93 season and “invading” coach Shawn Donlea’s life for six months (Keown acknowledgments), Keown makes Skyline reel in details that show the effects of this immersion experience. Keown, in his own words, came from a “vastly different world” from the one he wrote about (xi), but by the time he sat down to write he knew as much about the world of Oakland basketball as he did about his own Midwestern background. Keown’s sheltered background may seem to be a disadvantage; yet, it is in some ways advantageous because sometimes it takes someone who has not been part of a situation to be able to describe what sets it apart from other worlds. Someone who grew up in the
inner-city may not think the following situation unusual enough to write about: “There are no nets on the four hoops at Allendale Park, just red metal backboards and rims with no give. . . . There is a broken-down dryer on the lawn of the house directly across the street, its door laid open like a tongue. As always, there is a game in progress” (48). Keown, who grew up in rural Iowa, clearly recognized the differences between the inner-city neighborhood courts and the friendly, Midwestern courts he grew up on.

Although it may be impossible for a reader to know for certain that a work of creative non-fiction is 100 percent accurate, the author gains the reader’s trust with convincing details such as Keown’s observation of a bench at a park spray-painted with “‘FUCK MC HAMMER’ in perfect block letters” (49). But there is also no guarantee that anything is completely objective, as Roger Poole says: “The acknowledgment of subjectivity as the mode through which the world is inevitably received and interpreted is in fact the only adequately objective account of the world” (qtd. in Smart xi). The only acknowledgment readers have that a writer tried to remain accurate is from promises in the introductions from the writers, or from criticism after the work is published, such as happened with In Cold Blood when scholars discovered its inaccuracies. Just as newspaper readers are forced to rely on the sincerity of the reporters and editors to some extent, so are creative non-fiction readers forced to rely on the integrity of the author. The first journalistic “code” of the National Association of Newspaper Editors in 1923 addresses this issue in its “Canons of Journalism”:

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of all journalism worthy of the name.
A) By every conservation of good faith, a newspaper is constrained to be truthful. It is not to be excused for lack of thoroughness or accuracy within its control or failure to obtain command of these essential qualities.

B) Headlines should be fully warranted by the contents of the articles which they surmount. (Jones 221)

Attention to detail allows Bissinger to create passages which make *Friday Night Lights* seem more similar to a novel than a news story:

The alien atmosphere of everything, the strange space he and his teammates occupied underneath the decrepit flanks of the bleachers with its spotted shadows and jutting angles, the crackling screech of ‘Anchors Away’ over and over again on the ancient loudspeaker system to an absolutely empty stadium, the tortuous buildup of heat and humidity like the cranking of a catapult, only magnified the tension. ‘You okay?’ Mayes asked him.

‘I need to throw up,’ he said. ‘Go throw up.’ (117)

It is ironic that these lines make the book seem like fiction, while at the same time the text relies on being non-fiction. Bissinger could not have invented this scene accurately—he could not have accurately recreated direct quotes. The only way for Bissinger to capture this scene was by witnessing it.

These details are probably the single-most defining factor in setting creative non-fiction apart from other works of non-fiction: “It is said that genius lies in the details. Good newswriting also lies in the details” (Chancellor, Mears 60). Other non-fiction genres seldom go into the detail Blais did when she described how Jen folded her T-
shirts: "You could stack them in big piles in drawers that are never big enough, or you could lay them flat on the floor, fold them lengthwise into thirds, then take the remaining panel and fold that into thirds, then roll the fabric into cylinders with the logo showing" (54). It is not hard to imagine a novelist detailing a character folding up her clothes, but a biographer probably would not go into such detail (Winterowd 19). Knowing such minute details about another's life is uncommon for anyone except the reporter. From this scene it is also easy to see how it could have taken Blais months of research to find the details she did, especially considering the fact that reporters typically use only about 10-20 percent of the material they get from background research and interviews.

Immersion is an extended form of what reporters naturally do. No one criticized new journalists for using immersion as a technique. What people objected to were the techniques new journalists used that reporters did not. Point-of-view is probably the most debated technique of creative non-fiction writers. Most of the new journalists of the 1960s used multiple viewpoints, including first-person, although the most accurate tended to use the first-person voice sparingly. The three sports creative non-fiction authors studied here rarely, if ever, use first-person, indicating that these writers attempt to remain unattached to the central story. Contrary to Tom Wolfe's opinion from the '60s that multiple viewpoints are necessary in the best non-fiction writing, the only point of view desirable in creative non-fiction is third-person. Wolfe even criticized Truman Capote in 1973 for not getting more into his characters' minds in *In Cold Blood*: "Capote does not use point of view in as sophisticated a way as he does in fiction. One seldom feels that he is really inside the minds of the characters. One gets a curious blend of third-person point
of view and omniscient narration” (116). But other scholars, such as Lounsberry, criticize Capote for being inaccurate in *In Cold Blood*, implying that narration through a character other than the author is inherently inaccurate.

It must be left to the integrity of the author to remain as unattached to the story as possible, although to some extent this is impossible in creative non-fiction. Inevitably, many creative non-fiction authors make friends with their subjects. In journalism, this would constitute a conflict of interest, but in creative non-fiction the rules must be stretched due to the simple logistics of writers being forced to spend so much time with their subjects. “I still haunt it,” says Blais about her work. “It was definitely written by a woman in her 40’s, a mom, someone with no sports background—even though I am not a character.” Blais points out that although her presence was felt, her interaction with the team was not catalytic (book reading).

Creative non-fiction is by its definition more conservative in using point of view than new journalism. Composite characterization has no place in creative non-fiction—although Wolfe advocated its use in the ’60s. Smart notes that the non-fiction novel of the 1960s usually contains autobiographical information about the author, who plays a large role in the actual work. Interior monologue is also used more conservatively in modern creative non-fiction, and therefore more accurately, than it was during the new journalism era. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe used stream of consciousness-style interior monologue such as: “Waiting! They know they’ve got you, fool, have known for weeks...A noise down below. Them? 30 segundos left?” (206). Although Wolfe felt justified in writing this account because “There was an unusually rich record of
Kesey’s thoughts and feelings during this interlude. . . . Much of the direct interior monologue is taken from Kesey’s letters to McMurry” (204), it is impossible to tell exactly how much of it is from letters, and how much is Wolfe’s own conjecture.7

Smart points out that there is always a dominant point of view in the non-fiction novel: either first-person from the narrator’s point of view, or third-person, in which case the author is referred to as a character in the third-person voice (Smart 19). In creative non-fiction, though, third-person is always the dominant point of view. The only information about the author the reader should get is either in the introduction or assumed from the way the author presents the story. Contemporary creative non-fiction leaves no doubt that the authors did not assume what was going on in a source’s mind, at least as far as non-fiction is ever possible. If Bissinger, Blais, and Keown could not have observed or interviewed their sources for their thoughts, these 1990s authors would not have guessed at their thoughts. The resulting difference between Capote’s non-fiction and Blais, Bissinger, and Keown’s is that Capote’s work could not legitimately appear in a newspaper as a factual story, whereas Blais, Bissinger, and Keown’s work could. Capote’s work leans slightly too far towards the subjective side to be considered journalism.

Michael Norman, an author and former reporter and columnist for The New York Times, discusses the problems associated with point of view on the creative non-fiction Internet discussion list called WriterL:

[In] most newspaper features . . . the narrator does not attempt to assume any point of view other than that of the narrator. Fiction, on the other hand, is
often interior; the writer assumes the point of view of his characters, at least much of the time. So . . . this puts fiction in some way at odds with non-fiction, and we often encounter this on the page when we try to bend fiction’s ways to our purposes. (December 4, 1995)

The only way to avoid difficulty with point of view is to stay in third-person, which Bissinger, Blais and Keown all do with rare exceptions.

Use of the first-person is hard to avoid in this realm because the writer spends so much time with the characters, and conversations are often lop-sided without the writer’s half included. Keown’s book shows this difficulty quite clearly. He often “cheats” in order to get around the problem by using phrases like “when asked:” “Was he a senior?” Albert was asked,” (5) making it unclear who asked the question, although the reader assumes that it was Keown. Blais, however, proves that this is not necessary. The reader is never allowed to see the author or to hear her questions. Instead, characters’ thoughts are blended smoothly into the prose:

Also a freshman, she wished that she, like Lucia, had been moved up for the postseason from junior varsity to varsity. Of course she was not the equal of Jen and Jamila (“No way!”). Her goal for the coming 1992-93 season was to be moved up to varsity in the postseason. She was appalled by that final game with Hamp. It made her shudder to recall the image of Jamila racing back and forth on the court, coast to coast, a human boomerang, going it all alone, looking, in Rita’s eyes, “insane.” (62)

Interior monologue, or text which lets the reader in on a character’s personal
thoughts and feelings, is sometimes used in *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle*, such as in the following scene:

Good: She was alone. She walked onto the court and dribbled in a fashion that might seem aimless to an outsider; but in fact she was glancing at parts of the pavement, imagining: *This is where Jen will throw me the ball, here is where Jamila will pull up and dish it off, here is where Kathleen might miss a shot, and this is where I have to be for the rebound.* . . . Applauded only by the mosquitoes and the crickets, she would take the ball and pound it on the asphalt and set up and shoot. (75)

Here, Blais actually takes the authority to step into Kim’s mind and interpret her thoughts.

Keown also uses interior monologue similarly in *Skyline*:

On the bus back to Oakland, Donlea stared out at the lights of San Francisco and asked himself the question he asked from the beginning: What the hell am I doing here? He felt as if he had suspended his entire life to pursue the idealist’s dream, one that managed to merge his love for basketball and his social conscience, and now he was watching it slip through his fingers like dry sand. Was it worth it? Was he cut out for it? (34)

By stepping into Kim’s mind, into her imagination, Blais is using a technique which is precariously difficult. Even in interior monologue, Keown only strays into the first-person voice once. Keown is obviously averse to using first-person, although in this passage he repeats Donlea’s thoughts as if he were in the first-person.

Interior monologue relies on immersion in the reporting process in order to be
used effectively and accurately in the writing process. Obviously subjectivity is involved in writing interior monologue passages such as the above examples, so the more time the author spends getting to know her characters, the more accurate she will be in using interior monologue. Not surprisingly, interior monologue was greeted with suspicion when Wolfe first used it in the early years of new journalism. When in “The First Tycoon of Teen,” Wolfe started the article in an interior monologue stream of consciousness ramble, suspicious news magazine journalists interviewed the subject of the article who surprisingly described the story as “accurate.” Wolfe himself was not surprised, “since every detail in the passage was taken from a long interview with Spector about exactly how he felt at the time” (Wolfe 20). Still, interior monologue is not necessary in creative non-fiction, and authors need to approach it with extreme caution. It is much easier to be accurate about the color of a sofa than it is to be about someone else’s dreams about raindrops.

In *Friday Night Lights* the closest Bissinger comes to interior monologue is in passages such as the following: “L.V. felt pain. He felt anger. He felt rejection. But like everything else in his life, he ultimately accepted it as another disappointment that would somehow settle in” (264). Bissinger describes his characters’ emotions as if he knew what they were thinking even though he maintains a third-person perspective. Since this is as close as Bissinger comes to interior monologue, his success is an indication that his work is as objective as possible. Any time an author steps into someone else’s mind, she steps into the realm of subjectivity. Blais and Keown do so sparingly and painstakingly, but Bissinger manages to stay away from the area all together. Perhaps he does so at the
cost of not developing his characters as fully as Blais and Keown do, but at least they remain people and are not turned into fictional characters. Bissinger effectively proves how creative non-fiction authors can refine techniques started by the new journalists.

Using status details, material signs of the story's place in society, is another such technique started by the new journalists. Status details include "everyday gestures, habits, manner, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene" (Wolfe 32). To some extent, status details are also used by the reporter. John Chancellor, formerly of NBC News, and Walter R. Mears, former vice president of the Associated Press, advise beginning reporters in their 1995 book, The New News Business: "Color is best produced with details, not with adjectives. If the mural is painted in bright greens and reds, write that instead of 'brightly colored.' If the house is luxurious, try to estimate its price. . . . A fat man is a fat man, but a 285-pound man is better" (66). Authors of creative non-fiction usually capture such details in their long days and nights with their sources and use the status details in their descriptions of character and setting. According to Wolfe, status details are less understood than the other devices used by creative non-fiction authors, but the technique is as powerful as any other in literature (32). Using status details, Wolfe says, is natural to the journalist, and it is so powerful because status details show the reader real life (32). Chancellor and Mears agree: "Real things happen to real people in real places, people who bleed and sweat in Victorian hospitals or run-down courthouses, who wear double knits or tweeds, Rolexes
or Timexes, and who, under stress, say wonderful or terrible things” (60). Using status details in creative non-fiction is simply an extension of the way these authors would use details in their best news writing.

“Nothing happens nowhere,” Blais said at a book reading, emphasizing the importance of setting, which status details help to define, in creative non-fiction. In *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle* Blais uses status details extensively in the following passage to describe Amherst:

The town is, for the most part, smoke free, nuclear free, and eager to free Tibet. Ponchos with those little projectiles of fleece have never gone out of style. Birkenstocks (called Birkies), clogs, capes, Doc Marten’s, woven tops, and tie-dyed anything are all still the rage. With the exception of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Amherst is probably the only place in the United States where men can wear barets and not get beaten up. (Blais 28)

Most people recognize Birkenstocks as a sign of a laid-back, liberal attitude, and Blais uses this recognition to say these things about Amherst in a way that captures the reader’s attention and understanding. In the following case from *Skyline*, status details are again used to describe a particular setting and time:

Across the street from Skyline High School, in the exclusive Oakland hills, a house is for sale with the asking price of $1.55 million. It is a Southwestern-style estate, coral pink stucco with a red tile roof. A deck runs the width of the house in the back, overlooking a sheer cliff. The view is astonishing, stretching uninterrupted for at least one hundred miles. The skyline of San
Francisco sits in the middle, like the centerpiece of an elaborate table. The house—described in advertisements as 'an architectural masterpiece'—is surrounded on Skyline Boulevard by other houses in the same price range, many of them for sale. Inside the gymnasium at Skyline High School, about 400 yards from the house, there are no doors on any of the four toilet stalls in the boys bathroom. . . . (Keown xiii)

Here, Keown effectively uses status details to provide a crucial sense of contrast. This passage also illustrates the importance of time in the setting of creative non-fiction works. Timeliness is an important concept in news writing because it is a factor in what the audience wants and needs to know. For the same reason, timeliness is important to creative non-fiction writing. Stating the price of the coral pink house is an indication that the year in which Skyline took place is important. These stories convey information to their current audiences, as do newspapers. Unlike newspapers, their worth does not diminish as much with the passing of time, but the importance of time to the setting is crucial. These stories carry messages about specific societies, societies which change with time. Authors make these societies known through descriptions, using techniques such as status details, which indicate both time and setting.

Status details also help define characters. In Friday Night Lights Bissinger uses status details in his character descriptions: "In computer science, Brian Chavez wore faded blue jeans and black Reeboks. The number 85 jersey around his expansive chest nicely matched his earring with the numeral 85 embossed in gold" (143). Brand names such as Reebok are often used, giving an indication of the time and society the characters
are acting in. Brand names are instantly recognizable signs that can give clues to a character or personality. Status details such as these indicate "the entire pattern or behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be" (Wolfe 32). Reeboks, for example, indicate that Brian is athletic, or hopes to be, and that he has enough money to buy expensive shoes, or wishes that he did.

Besides obvious status details that involve name brands, other details can be used as status details as well. In In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle, Blais uses minute details from her immersion experience which make the book read like fiction. Details such as the entire contents of Hurricane star Jamila’s purple fanny pack (a medallion with a map of Africa, a miniature African mask, an autograph book signed by Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela and Desmond Tutu and Kenny Anderson, a necklace, an old silver spoon, dice, a picture of Michael Jordan, a page of his quotes) are common throughout the book (Blais 44-5). The recipe for the dish Jamila’s mother served to the Hurricanes for their pre-game meal conjures up images in much the same way a novel does: "chicken sauteed in oil with garlic and lemon juice, served on pasta" (44). These examples could have been randomly selected from any page of Blais’ book, so full is it of similar detailed anecdotes, all of which make the book read more like a novel than most non-fiction. Using these details is essential to the art of creative non-fiction.

Immersion, point of view, and status details provide the backdrop creative non-fiction authors need when they begin the writing process. Authors use these materials when they write, they rely on them, but when authors shift to the writing stage they also
shift into the world of creativity. While journalistic techniques ensure the "non-fiction" half of creative non-fiction, fictional techniques provide the "creative" half.
Chapter Four: Fictional Techniques

"Journalism allows its readers to witness history; fiction gives its readers an opportunity to live it" (Hersey 82). While journalistic techniques bring about accuracy, fictional techniques evoke the reader's emotions. "Non-fiction as an art form has all the possibilities of fiction... People who do non-fiction well are doing an art form as high as fiction" (Talese qtd. in Winterowd 112). Creative non-fiction goes one step further than most non-fiction. It uses the techniques of fiction as well as the techniques of journalism, including characterization, scene construction, and distinctive style.

Bissinger, Blais, and Keown all rely heavily on these fictional techniques. By using the same literary devices that novelists use, writers of creative non-fiction are able to elicit the same strong emotional responses: "it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional diologisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space... to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally" (Wolfe 15). The main difference in this writing stage is that the creative non-fiction author relies on her notes and background knowledge while the novelist is free to create. It is permissible to use the traditional devices of fiction in order to create and study creative non-fiction because, as Hellmann says, the form is similar to fiction in its "experiential, aesthetic nature" (29). Using fictional methods started with the new journalists, who approached their longer writing tasks as journalists, but who also used the fictional devices of construction of scenes, dialogue, interior point of view, and status details to convey their experiences to the audience (Hellmann 3). Sims describes some of the similarities
between fiction and creative non-fiction. He says that characters in creative non-fiction need to be brought to life just as they are in fiction, and that these characters even have a special power because they are real people.

Wolfe, too, writes about this special power: "an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened. The disclaimers have been erased. The screen is gone. The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved" (34). Just as movies based on real life have become increasingly popular because of their power of attracting people who are compelled by the fact that what they are seeing actually happened, creative non-fiction authors have that same kind of pull with their readers.⁸

When authors bring their subjects to life in prose, strict adherence to the rules of creative non-fiction is necessary in order to ensure that the characters do not misrepresent their real-life models. On the use of composite characters, common during the beginnings of the new journalism, Hellmann says: "the use of such fictional techniques as composite characters and compressed narratives, while actually having a long tradition in journalism, certainly violates the journalistic contract. If they are revealed to the reader, they turn the work into realistic fiction with strong elements of reportage. If not revealed... they are clearly unfair distortions of the subject" (19). Instead, authors must rely on their reporting and background research in their characterization. Composite characterization occurs when these journalistic principles are not adhered to, producing less accurate results. Fortunately, the use of composite characterization is no longer
widely accepted by creative non-fiction authors. It is understandable that characterization is especially tricky for the journalist, because thorough characterization is not normal practice in journalism: "Newswriting will always call for quick, bright characterizations of people and descriptions of events" (Chancellor, Mears 63). *Time* magazine started using very brief descriptions of people 1920s when the editors decided to include two words of description before every person's name. "One of the words usually referred to physical characteristics, the other to character values" (Chancellor, Mears 63).

Creative non-fiction authors portray actual personalities who not only seem real, but are real. Hellmann discusses how this perception affects the reader: "The realistic novelist . . . says to the reader, 'All this did not really happen, but it could have,' whereas the new journalist can say, 'All this actually did happen, so do not blame me if it does not seem real'" (Hellmann 11). Certainly this statement should be applied to characters as well: These people are actually alive, so do not blame the author if they do not seem real. Suspension of disbelief is unnecessary to readers of creative non-fiction because everything they are reading is true.

Blais' work is an example of how today's creative non-fiction authors use characterization. Her understanding of the Hurricanes' chemistry, which proves to be the key to their victory, is evident in the way Blais brings the teammates to life. The reader gets the feeling in Blais' work that she could easily step inside any of her characters and speak for them--but she generally refrains from doing so. Blais carefully characterizes each person on the team and her contributions, and Blais lets each girl stand apart from her writing, often relying on the opinions of other members of the team: "Jamila had a
reputation for being treated protectively by her parents” (44), “Jen Pariseau was known locally as the best thing that ever happened to Pelham” (45), “Rita Powell was not a wealthy person, but she has been known all her life for her intensity” (63). Blais never inserts her own opinion in any of the text, thus allowing the readers to come to know the players, not the author.

If in a novel a minor character is described by a teacher’s comments on her report card, the description might be artful, but it only took the author’s creativity to create it—the author did not have to rely on her research as well. Researching details is the first step for the creative non-fiction author, but choosing which details to use is also important, and this step must be a creative process. The details Blais chooses and the way she presents them must be done in a way that is interesting to the reader. Choosing details is part of the art of creative non-fiction that evolved from fictional methods. Here, the details develop Kathleen Poe’s character: Blais reports that Kathleen Poe’s teachers described her on her report cards as “enthusiastic,” “helpful,” “consistently cheerful,” “positive,” “cooperative,” “industrious,” an “avid reader,” an “absolute delight,” and “a joy!” (77). Instead of simply describing her subjects in her own words, Blais finds creative alternative ways to describe her characters, and since these alternatives are usually one step closer to real life she maintains a higher degree of accuracy than the author who remains removed.

Of course, in order to use characterization effectively, the creative non-fiction author must understand her subjects and how they think to an unprecedented degree. It is this understanding of each individual on the team which allows Blais to delve into the
psychological forces driving the team. Blais’ description of “Hoop Phi” sums up the
team and shows off Blais’ own understanding of it: “Jamila had heard about a team of
college women who referred to themselves as ‘Hoop Phi.’ Something about the
expression, with its two strong syllables, insistent as a drumbeat, insinuated itself into her
consciousness, and try as she might to put it aside, it became in her mind the perfect
slogan for this year’s team” (144). Blais is characterizing the whole Hurricane team using
the knowledge gained during her immersion process. When she needs to, Blais is capable
of relying on her understanding to create her own descriptions of her characters.

Characterization is defined in A Handbook to Literature by C. Hugh Holman as
“the creation of images of these imaginary persons so credible that they exist for the
reader as real within the limits of the fiction” (91). The methods of characterization
include “the explicit presentation by the author of the character through direct exposition.
. . . the presentation of the character in action and . . . the representation from within a
color” (91). Creative non-fiction authors use these methods not to create images of
imaginary people, but to create reflections of real people.

The knowledge from Keown’s immersion experience and his understanding of
basketball also allow him to write about his subjects as if they were characters in a novel:
“His legs bear the sinewy signs of hard work, of running up hills and down streets and--
more than anything—back and forth on basketball courts. There is muscle and bone and
not much more. He is like something out of a movie, a skinny, left-handed white kid too
stubborn to give in and too enamored of the game to give it up” (49). Keown’s
knowledge of basketball in general and of these players in particular give him the
expertise he needs in order to develop his characters fully.

In *Friday Night Lights* Bissinger delves into the personalities of several characters. Boobie is one such character:

Boobie himself was well aware that all eyes were poised on him this season, and while he luxuriated in it, he seemed almost carefree about it. Holding court in the trainer’s room shortly after the practices had begun in the August heat, he bantered with the nine-year-old son of one of the coaches as if they were best pals in grade school together, calling him “waterbug head,” asking him if he had a girlfriend, grabbing his head and giving him a noogie, telling him that when it came to “the shoe,” Adidas would never hold a nickel next to the almighty Nike. (55)

This scene would make a perfect example of Holman’s definition of characterization by presenting the character through direct action. Bissinger later comes back to this scene to show how Boobie has changed. After Boobie gets cut from varsity, he stops hanging out in the training room and joking around, giving the reader some valuable insight into Boobie’s character.

The understanding gained during the immersion experience also allows authors creativity in description. The following passage about Rita’s room illustrates what Blais’ understanding of her characters allows her to do: “One was spacious but dark. The other was minuscule, with not even enough floor space left over after the bed and bureau and a couple of bookshelves were in position for a friend to camp out in a sleeping bag. But it had two windows. . . . She chose the room with the light” (63). Because Blais already
knew so much about Rita, she was able to employ this literary symbolism often used in fiction writing. In fiction writing, Blais would be creating a character; here, she is reflecting a personality. The role of characters in creative non-fiction is the same as their role in novels.

Figures of speech, defined by Holman as "the various uses of language which depart from customary construction, order, or significance in order to achieve special effects or meanings" (224) such as Blais uses in describing Rita’s room are used much more profusely in creative non-fiction than they are in journalism. In *Friday Night Lights*, Bissinger continually compares the Permian Panthers to brides getting ready for their weddings: "The players finished dressing with the methodical pride of a bride preparing for his wedding, every piece of equipment adjusted and pulled until it was perfect" (272) symbolizing a "marriage" between the Panthers and football. To break this pact between teammates and coaches, a life-long commitment, meant devastation and shame, a failed attempt at the most important thing in life. Bissinger uses this wedding imagery to say all of these things, to imprint them repeatedly into the reader’s mind. Blais and Keown use figures of speech to a lesser extent. *Skyline* contains scattered similes and metaphors, such as, "He was a true connoisseur of dunks. He talked about them like an art collector discussing Van Gogh" (79). Blais uses a similar light touch: "Unless the high school elbows its way into public consciousness, it is easy to dismiss, not unlike the tiny print known as agate used by newspapers for the scores of faraway games" (132).

Through the use of fictional devices such as characterization and figures of
speech, the author’s own style inevitably surfaces: “Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable” (Strunk and White 67). Style is defined by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White as “an increment in writing . . . the sound [the author’s] words make on paper” (66). To show how personal and individual style can be, Strunk and White present examples of William Faulkner’s and Ernest Hemingway’s work without labeling the examples with the author’s names. Of course, it is as obvious as if the names were printed next to the examples whose work is whose, just as people who have read Bissinger’s, Blais’, and Keown’s works would be able to distinguish examples. Strunk and White also use one of Wolfe’s sentences as an example of style: “Quick are the mouths of earth, and quick the teeth that fed upon this loveliness,” (qtd. in Strunk and White 67). Try re-stating this sentence, and the style is gone: “The mouths of earth are quick, and the teeth that fed upon this loveliness are quick, too” (Strunk and White 68). Applying this method to Blais’ work, In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle becomes Hopefulness Is in These Girls’ Muscles. Obviously, style is a necessary, yet often obscure, part of creative non-fiction writing.

It is the creative side of the author’s mind which allows Blais to do things such as:

. . . complicated, and that’s the case of anyone’s child who plays the piano.

Complicated: the case of anyone’s child who plays.

Complicated: anyone’s child. (251)

Style allows Bissinger to write sentimental passages such as: “Eventually the sobs came to an end. So did the embraces that under the gray glow of the moonlight seemed as
lingering as a slow dance with someone you suddenly knew you no longer loved” (233). Style allows Keown to be artistic: “The game is black. The people driving past in their cars are black. The people eating lunch on the lawn are black. The music is black. The talk is black. The players are black. All except one” (48). These three passages show that the authors are as interested in the actual aesthetics of the words they write as they are in reporting the facts accurately. It is difficult to do both, to be accurate and, at the same time, to be creative. The tone of each book comes through in each short passage, showing that it is possible to do both.

Creativity must also be depended on in determining the overall arrangement of a creative non-fiction work. Wolfe discusses portraying events in dramatic scenes rather than in chronological order, in which most factual accounts are written (31). As in a novel, there is usually some sort of “organizing principle--plot or theme or idea” (Holman 354). Creative non-fiction works center around a plot:

Aristotle, who assigns [plot] the place of chief honor in writing and calls it ‘the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy,’ formulated, in The Poetics, a very precise definition, which has been the basis for most discussions of plot. He called it ‘the imitation of an action’ and also ‘the arrangement of the incidents’ . . . His test for a sound plot was ‘whether any given event is a case of propter hoc or post hoc.’ Thus, causality was a fundamental quality of a plot for Aristotle. (Holman 396)

Friday Night Lights, In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle and Skyline all end in dramatic championship game scenes, with the preceding pages creating the drama, not necessarily
in chronological order. *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle* is interspersed with character descriptions. Most of the time, the season progresses in chronological order, but Blais spends just as much time flashing back to describing individual characters as she does reporting the progress of the season. This sets up the dynamics for the dramatic climax and conclusion, a conclusion which relies on a deep knowledge of the characters. *Skyline* also mainly progresses in chronological order, most likely because the nature of sports seasons is such that the dramatic scenes usually come at the end. *Skyline* also employs dramatic scenes in its subplot, about the stars of the team being recruited by college coaches. There is an introduction, rising action, climax and falling action just as Holman defines it.

*Friday Night Lights*, the longest of the works, is carefully set up in its organization to retain reader interest and also to climax in the final dramatic scene. The book is split up into four sections of the season, but includes chapters such as “School Days,” which delves into the problems of athletes and academics in Texas by chronicling athletes at a different high school, and “Civil War,” which describes the conflict between Odessa and Midland apart from athletics. The chapters are important for their description but they do not fit any chronological time pattern. *Friday Night Lights* also starts and ends with a single character, Boobie, who is not a central character throughout the rest of the book. *Friday Night Lights* progresses in chronological order, but takes long breaks from basketball to describe other aspects of the town which are not chronologically ordered. This set-up allows more room for drama, which in turn evokes the emotions of the reader—the purpose of fictional techniques.
The new journalists were the first to use fictional techniques in their journalism, as Tom Wolfe points out: "What was new about it [new journalism] was the utilization of techniques in journalism that had previously been used only in fiction. Today, the techniques are very much known by writers for newspapers, and in magazine work. You can pick up . . . almost any magazine that allows good writing in its pages, and you'll find examples of it" (qtd. in Hammer 4). The fictional techniques of the new journalists has slowly been streamlined into everyday journalism. But these techniques are even more evident in longer works of creative non-fiction. Characterization, figures of speech, style and portraying events in dramatic scenes work together to create works which could be easily mistaken for novels. Like novels, the works are usually read for pleasure, not for scholarship. As with the best novels, the best creative non-fiction books evoke self-discovery in the reader through the emotion and sentiment-evoking fictional devices.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Gay Talese sums up some of the best reasoning behind the growth of creative non-fiction and the new journalism: "The best new journalism, though often reading like fiction, is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form" (qtd. in Hollowell 32). What authors of creative non-fiction are seeking is a larger truth. These authors are seeking what cannot be sought by journalists or by fiction writers because of the nature of those genres. This new form of literature borrows techniques from both genres and uses them in such a way that furthers the understanding and compassion of the reader.

"By writing about real people whose lives are touched by the issues of our time, and by using the narrative techniques of fiction in telling their stories, I have attempted to make comprehensible the complexity, and sometimes the hypocrisy, of the society in which we live" (Talese qtd. in Winterowd 57). New journalists and creative non-fiction authors not only interpret events in society, they also bring them to the forefront of the audience’s consciousness. Blais, Bissinger, and Keown all discovered "larger truths" about society through the realm of high school athletics. Blais discovered the progress that has been made in female athletics, and how much there is left to be accomplished: "This is just one team in one season.' It alone cannot change the discrimination against girls and their bodies throughout history. But here, in these girls, hope is a muscle" (183). Bissinger discovered the powerful, often all-encompassing element of sport in
small-town America: “It is also a troubling examination of the American mania for sport. Mr. Bissinger does not pontificate about the exploitation of teenage athletes, about racism, about the perversion of public educational institutions. He tells stories that don’t need exegesis. There is life on every page. I found this book exciting, funny, and above all, horrifying” (Tracy Kidder qtd. in Bissinger dustjacket.) And Keown discovered the role of sport in inner-city life:

The lives of young men and women in America’s inner cities are all too often reported in bland, monotonous statistics. We hear dropout rates, murder rates, addiction rates and welfare rates until they coalesce into the same anesthetizing blur. To too many of us, the children of the inner city live nameless, faceless lives. I set out to attach names and faces, and to tell their stories. They deserve to be heard. (Keown author’s note)

They were heard. These three authors presented their discoveries in creative ways that their audiences identified with. The works have been treated by critics mainly as literary works, and they have all fared well. They deserve even more credit than this, however: they also deserve the same amount of respect and attention from the journalistic world.

From these three works, it is also possible to learn how the genre of creative non-fiction works. Creative non-fiction depends on fictional techniques because “most people don’t act simply on the basis of the things they perceive intellectually” (Fontaine 2).

Therefore, there is a need for more than just the basic facts provided by most journalists in newspaper articles. Creative non-fiction writers turn straight news stories into works
which evoke the emotions as well as the intellect.

At the same time, creative non-fiction depends on journalism for its accuracy. People in today’s society want to know about actual events, and authors of creative non-fiction explain these events in the unique detail and format characteristic of the genre.

Because the genre is a cross-section of two better-known genres, creative non-fiction works are often misinterpreted. “Today some of the most vital and creative writing in the English language is being done by journalists. Perhaps this is insufficiently recognized because many critics, in and out of universities, don’t understand the form” (Fontaine 1). When critics misinterpreted Blais’ work as only a sports book, for example, it was because they were not familiar with the form of creative non-fiction. When Blais started developing the story, she knew she wanted to write a work of creative non-fiction, but some critics never took the genre into account. Instead, they saw the book only as a sports book, which is problematic because Blais is not a sports expert (Blais book reading). It is necessary, therefore, to study and become familiar with this form. Works such as the three studied here raise awareness in athletes and those interested in sports about the social issues involved in high school athletics through journalistic techniques, and through fictional techniques, also touch and inspire those readers. In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle, Friday Night Lights and Skyline are mere representatives of an expanding genre. As sports creative non-fiction becomes known and studied, hopefully these and other vital and creative works will come to the forefront of American literature.
Notes

1 Gay Talese wrote the article that many refer to as the first work of new journalism for *Esquire* in 1962, a piece about Joe Louis that included dialogue with his wife that shocked the traditional journalism world because never before had everyday conversation and details been included in a magazine article.

Talese is also the author of the 1970 *Honor Thy Father*, a new journalist’s account of a father and son involved in the mafia.

2 When discussing creative non-fiction, the problem of terminology pervades the entire spectrum of the discussion. Hellmann insists on placing new journalism in the genre of “fiction.” Hellmann supports this claim intelligently and convincingly, but a simple error in judgment can cause a lot of confusion. By using the term “fiction” instead of a more accurate term such as “literature,” Hellmann does not intend to imply that the new journalism is not true or accurate—but of course “fiction” implies those very things.

3 For similar reasons, Blais stresses that she wanted to write a real book for real people in the 1990s (Blais book reading).

4 In his essay “No guides need apply: Locating the non-fiction novel,” John Russell critiques several of the new journalists for using simplistic techniques. These techniques are also employed by Blais, Keown and Bissinger: In fact, they are similar to the techniques necessary to creative non-fiction. For example, Russell criticizes the “framing” methods at the beginning of *In Cold Blood* and at the conclusion of *Kool-Aid*, simple disclaimers informing the reader that what they are reading is non-fiction.
Russell also criticizes the authors for other such obscurely-named techniques as "deixis" ("when a noun on first appearance is headed by a definite article.") Russell likens the technique to the openings of the 1950s "Dragnet" radio series, and says that Wolfe "deserves something like the 'Dragnet' prize for the way he begins The Right Stuff" (Russell 427). Finally, he gives up on the new journalists by saying that their works do not qualify as non-fiction novels, apparently because they all use the same "easy" literary devices.

5 Sims points out that few people have the resources to be able to create a novel-length work of creative non-fiction. "Not every young writer can stake two or three years on a writing project that might turn up snake eyes" (10). Writing creative non-fiction is more of a gamble for writers than writing a novel, so fewer writers try it.

6 A compilation of her shorter works is collected in The Heart is an Instrument: Portraits in Journalism.

7 Wolfe is discussing a scene from The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test in which Ken Kesey is in hiding in Mexico after having been arrested in California for possession of marijuana, and is writing a letter to his friend Larry McMurtry.

8 This is contrary to Connery's belief: "Because literary journalism uses techniques common to fiction, because it relies on themes and atmosphere, it often has fiction's look and resonance, its life, but never to quite the same degree and depth" (Connery 313). Indeed, because creative non-fiction is infused with the lives of real people, it often has more life than fiction.
Works Cited


Russell, John. "'No Guides Need Apply': Locating the Nonfiction Novel." University of Toronto Quarterly. 59 (Spring 1990): 413-433.


