

“Perhapsing”: The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction

by Lisa Knopp

At some point, writers of creative nonfiction come to a roadblock or dead end in our writing, where we don't have access to the facts we need to tell our story or to sustain our reflection with depth and fullness. If only it was ethical to just make something up, we might think, or to elaborate a bit on what we know. But of course, then we wouldn't be writing creative nonfiction. It might appear that our choices in such cases are to either abandon the topic or write a thinly developed scene or reflection.

In *Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston offers another option. In the first essay, “No Name Woman,” Kingston's mother tells her a brief, cautionary tale about her father's sister in China, who became pregnant even though her husband had been away for years. On the night the baby is born, villagers raid the family's house and farm. The aunt gives birth in a pigsty, and then kills herself and her baby by jumping into the well from which the family drank. Kingston's father was so shamed by his sister's behavior that Kingston was forbidden to ever mention her in his presence.

In order to write the essay, Kingston needed a deeper, fuller understanding of her aunt's life and a clearer picture of what happened the night she drowned. Since the only information Kingston had was the bare-bones story that her mother had told her, Kingston chose to speculate an interior life for her aunt. I call this technique “perhapsing.” Notice in the following passage how Kingston uses perhapsing to imagine an identity for the man who impregnated her aunt (italics are mine):

Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or *perhaps* he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. *Perhaps* he worked in an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told.

The word *perhaps* cues the reader that the information Kingston is imparting is not factual but speculative. Kingston doesn't need to use *perhaps* in every sentence, because we can see that one perhapsing leads to another. We can also see that when Kingston presents facts (“He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex”), she does not begin those sentences with *perhaps*.

Elsewhere in the essay, Kingston uses other words and phrases to alert the reader when she's moving from fact to conjecture (italics are mine):

“It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company. Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though.”

She *may have been* unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection the family lavished on her.

By perhapsing, Kingston offers motives, actions, justifications, and specific details that add richness, texture, and complexity absent in her mother's account, without crossing the line into fiction. Kingston

believed that by remaining silent about her desperate and defiant ancestor, she was participating in her aunt's punishment. By perhapsing, Kingston freed both herself and her aunt from the traditions that bound them.

Perhapsing can be particularly useful when writing about childhood memories, which are often incomplete because of a child's limited understanding at the time of the event, and the loss of details and clarity due to the passage of time.

Susan Griffin offers a fine example of how perhapsing allows a writer to bring detail and understanding to a memory of a long-ago event. In "Red Shoes," an essay in her collection *The Eros of Everyday Life*, Griffin recounts a childhood memory in which her grandmother gave her a pair of red shoes that she coveted. This memory is essential to the essay because it serves as the springboard and touchstone for Griffin's musings on such dichotomies as mind versus body, domestic versus private spheres, public versus private memories, and genre (fiction versus nonfiction; detached, intellectualized essay versus intimate memoir). In the following segment, notice the various ways in which Griffin signals her uncertainty as she presents her memory of being given the red shoes – if, indeed, she was given the shoes (italics and ellipses are mine):

I was, *I suppose*, shopping with my grandmother in the department store with the X-ray machine that made a green picture of the bones in my feet. I have the vague feeling my grandmother finds red impractical. . . . *I cannot remember* whether or not my grandmother let me have those shoes. . . . *Perhaps* she did buy me those red shoes. I can see them now in my closet which was also her second closet, the closet of the black silk robe, the place where she kept her rarer treasures, her two fur coats, worn only on the most special occasions. . . . and, *am I embellishing here*, her sweater with the rhinestones on it, or were they pearls?

When an author's memories of concrete details are sketchy or absent, the technique of perhapsing not only allows her to recreate the scene effectively, it also helps establish her as a reliable narrator. Because Griffin admits what she doesn't know and tells me when she's speculating, I trust her to be a reliable narrator and follow her willingly through her other memories and complex, philosophical wanderings.

Writing Exercise:

Select a passage in one of your essays that could be made richer and fuller through the use of speculation. If your memory of the time you learned a family secret is fuzzy and incomplete, "perhaps" details and plausible dialogue. If the person you're profiling can't or won't say why he began playing the banjo when his wife left him, "perhaps" some likely motives. If you and your family don't know why your grandmother inserted such a peculiar clause into her will, "perhaps" plausible motives. In addition to *perhaps*, other words and phrases you can use include *maybe*, *suppose*, *if*, *what if*, *might have/could have*, *possibly*, *imagine*, *wonder*, *perchance*.

Lisa Knopp is the author of four collections of essays: *Interior Places* (2008) and *The Nature of Home* (2002), published by University of Nebraska Press, and *Flight Dreams: A Life in the Midwestern Landscape* (1998) and *Field of Vision* (1996), published by the University of Iowa Press. Knopp is an associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and a visiting faculty member in Goucher College's low-residency MFA in Creative Nonfiction program in Baltimore.