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Poetry as Fiction

A poet explains why it is important to make things up

BY KIM DOWER

Did Robert Frost really stop by the woods on a snowy evening? Did Billy Collins actually visit his parents' graves to ask them what they thought of his new glasses? Who started the rumor that poems are autobiographical?

In my poem, "They Took the Mailbox Away," the speaker confesses that she once tossed a half-eaten ice-cream dish covered with chocolate sprinkles into a mailbox. She worries that the stickiness destroyed important mail—possibly even ruined people's lives. Audiences always laugh when I read the poem, but afterward people ask, "Did you really throw ice cream into the mailbox? Did anyone see you?"

When my first collection, *Air Kissing on Mars*, appeared on the bestseller list at Book Soup in Los Angeles, I was thrilled, but also confused to see that it was listed in the nonfiction column. Not only readers, but bookstores and even libraries classify poetry as nonfiction—i.e., autobiography!

On the eve of the publication of my second collection, *Slice of Moon*, with its many poems written in the first person and inspired by intimate events, I wonder, and even worry, whether family and friends will take it for granted that my poems are all based on true experiences. Should I care?

As a literary publicist I've promoted hundreds of books, including many crime and mystery titles—lots of dark, scary stuff. No one ever asks the author of one of these novels, "Did you really shoot someone in the chest and toss him over the side of a yacht?" Fiction is fiction. Poetry is fact. How did that happen?

The best poetry, like the best fiction, lifts us out of ourselves and our lives, while simultaneously connecting us to ourselves and our lives. If it's really good, we'll think about it for days, weeks, or years after we've read it. We'll want to read it again, seeing new things each time. Poets embellish, create, and lie, just like our fiction-writing brothers and sisters. We want to give you a good ride—just like they do! We want to drum up emotion and fear; we want to terrify and console you!

The intensity of a good poem that immediately grabs you and connects you to our emotions—a poem that breaks your heart, makes you laugh a deep and knowing laugh, or shows you a fresh way to see something familiar—is part of what makes you believe that the poet must be speaking from personal experience. Perhaps you want the poem to be true because it feels so true. The fact is, we poets are not telling you our life stories—we want you to see your lives in our poems.

It's the "speaker" in the poem, not the poet, who is telling you the truth. At writing workshops around the county, newbies are frequently reminded by their teachers and fellow poets to refer to the "characters" in their poems as "speakers." New poets must also be reminded that not all things that happen make good material for poems. Get away from the truth! Flip it. Turn it against itself.

We all know Emily Dickinson rarely left her house. How could she know everything she knew? How could she write so stunningly about life, love, desire, and longing, and offer the brilliant insights she gave us? As autobiographical as much of Sylvia Plath's poems are, her metaphors and "lies" are present everywhere: "Daddy, I have had to kill you."

Chances are, some people who listen to me read at upcoming signings will think my poems are confessions. They may think the poem "Boob Job," about feeling a strange woman's breasts in a dressing room at Loehmann's, really happened, or that "I [really] Lost My Mother at Bloomingdales." Some will even believe that I actually waxed my bank teller's eyebrows, and that he then gave them to his daughter to use as mats in the master bath of her dark and dreamy dollhouse.

Speaking for the poets I know, it's our hope that readers will find surprises about their own lives, not surprises about ours, in our work—that they will learn more about themselves than about us when they read our poetry. We reach deep inside ourselves to bring out the best imagery we can, diffused through our experiences, dreams, and subconscious minds. And often, we simply make stuff up—stretch the lies until their marks are invisible, so they can become someone else's truth.

*Kim Dower is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *Slice of Moon* (Red Hen Press, Oct. 1). She is also the founder of Kim-from-L.A. Literary & Media Services.*

