



Being Genre-Fluid

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I BECAME GENRE-FLUID by chance, not design. I'd always thought of myself as an author of literary fiction — a novelist and short-story writer. It was while lying in bed one spring morning one-and-a-half years after my sister's untimely death – and two months after her partner's unexpected passing – that I suddenly knew I had to write about their tragic accident at sea or else my grief would stifle and totally silence me. But how? Where to start? Not as autobiographical nonfiction, because that would have felt too ghoulish, too self-important; and not as fiction either, because that would have felt like a betrayal of them and their ordeal, and of myself.

A few years earlier, thanks to the Royal Literary Fund appointing me a Reading Round Lector, I had begun to read much more extensively than I'd ever done before, certainly outside my comfort zone. I read countless short texts of fiction, nonfiction, memoir, read countless poems — experimental, traditional, hybrid, you name it. The RLF project proved so successful that I continued running my group privately after my appointment finished.

Then, a fortnight before my creative-existential crisis, I came across Jo Ann Beard's 'The Fourth State of Matter', published in *The New Yorker* in 1996. This extraordinarily powerful narrative reads like literary fiction but is actually a true account of a college massacre in the United States. Its genre-defying form was a revelation. And it became a catalyst. It seemed to give me permission to try and write about the tragedy in my family in



any way I chose, free of formal constraints, free of the rigidity of genres. Ever since my sister's accident I'd been grappling with endless questions, many of them unanswerable, and on that particular spring morning I had a sudden inspiration: how about expressing my inner turmoil in multiple-choice format? This would allow me to mix fact with conjecture or fiction. It would also allow me to sort through my thoughts, to chronicle, almost impartially – at least on the surface – my sorrow and loss. Here are a few lines to illustrate what I had in mind:

My sister loved

- A. her family
- B. her partner
- C. kayaks

My sister's partner loved

- A. her
- B. his family
- C. kayaks

The resulting five-page piece I called '(Un)certainities' and regarded as a short story, albeit a short story in an unusual form, and submitted as such to a couple of literary magazines. It got rejected. Meanwhile, a good writer friend had read the text and kept referring to it as 'your poem'. Which annoyed me. Still, I eventually sent off '(Un)certainities' to the *Mslexia*/Poetry Book Society Women's poetry competition 2019. To my disbelief – and delight – it won 1st prize. Not only that, but it also got shortlisted for Best Single Poem in the Forward Prizes for Poetry 2020.

'(Un)certainities', my genre-fluid experiment, has opened up two new projects for me: a novel in short texts of different forms and genres on the one hand, and a first collection of poems on the other. Prizes can boost one's confidence enormously. In my case, they seem to have kickstarted a 'career' in poetry.