



On Genres

Sara Wheeler

WHEN I STARTED OUT AS a writer of narrative nonfiction my editor would say, if I proposed a project that wasn't *quite* a travel book, 'But where are Waterstones going to put it?'

Every book had to fit into a department then. I rejoice in the hybridisation of nonfiction over the past three decades: nobody would ask my editor's question now. In 1995 Dava Sobel's smash bestseller *Longitude* marked a pivotal moment in the trend: not quite history, not quite biography, not quite popular science — the hybrid had arrived, and readers wanted it.

What, though, of the eternal divide between fiction and nonfiction? On the whole, I believe a writer to be either on one side of it, or on the other. Authors equally strong on both sides are few (Orwell, Steinbeck and Pamuk among that elite group — you'll have your own suggestions). I feel strongly about this for two reasons. One, I was surely born a nonfiction writer. Two, most of the travel scribes of the generation before me — my role models — alternated their travelogues with novels. Why didn't they realise the novels aren't any good?

Chekhov famously spoke of medicine as his wife and writing as his mistress, later recycling the quip to say that fiction was his wife and the theatre his mistress. When later he took a greater leap, beyond both plays and short stories, and wrote an account of his travels to a penal colony in the Russian Far East, he told his brother that when he sat down with a pen and notebook to record something that actually happened — that is to say,



nonfiction – he felt he was wearing the wrong trousers. The masterpiece *Sakhalin Island*, which involved an epic journey through Siberia, is itself a cross-genre work blending investigative journalism with travel narrative. Anton Pavlovich published it first as a series of articles in the *New Times* — a rare example of journalism as literature.

One cannot deny the existence of a genre hierarchy among writers, with fiction at the top. Bruce Chatwin turned down the Thomas Cook Travel Book of the Year award, and its cheque, because, he averred, ‘I’m not a travel writer’. The genre was beneath him; fiction represented a higher calling. I don’t mind admitting that there’s something in the notion that proper writers are novelists. Then again, most novels aren’t any good. And a nonfiction writer at the top of his or her game – Michael Holroyd, say or Martha Gellhorn – can’t be beaten in any field.

If there *is* a hierarchy of literary genres, poetry comes even above novels, as every poet believes. I suppose that’s right too: poetry, like music, communicates before it’s understood.

Words on a page, huh? I leave the last word to V. S. Naipaul, once the greatest living writer of English prose. Asked why he had never written an autobiography, Naipaul reflected on the intrinsic differences between fiction and nonfiction. ‘An autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned,’ said the sage. ‘But fiction never lies: it reveals the writer *totally*.’