



## *Author Asks*

*from Julie Marie Wade,  
author of Small Fires*

13-digit ISBN (paper): 978-1-936747-02-3

- 1 There is a lot of debate about what labels like “creative nonfiction” and “literary nonfiction” actually mean and whether they are useful. Sometimes people ask, “Why don’t you just write ‘fiction,’ since it’s really all the same anyway?” How is your reading of *Small Fires* influenced by its genre classification as “nonfiction”? By its more specific genre classifications as “memoir” or “lyric essays”? How is your relationship to character and story different (if it is) when approaching a work of nonfiction than a work of fiction?
- 2 I always tell my students that *how* leads to *what*, claiming that if we understand how a work of literature is assembled we have greater/fuller access to the way(s) it means. So let’s test my theory. How does the form of *Small Fires* help you relate and respond to its content? What do you notice, for instance, about the progression of essays from “Keepsake” to “The Flower of Afterthought”? Do the sequence and grouping of these essays illustrate particular themes, patterns, or relationships? How might you have ordered this collection, and why?
- 3 If you read *Small Fires* as a bildungsroman (coming-of-age narrative), what changes do you notice in the narrator over the course of this book? How are changes in her consciousness and attitude reflected in dialogue, gesture, even the style of individual essays? What changes do you notice in other important figures in her life?
- 4 If you read *Small Fires* as an elegy, what losses/deaths—both literal and symbolic—are being explored here? If “the flower of afterthought” represents “the wish that things had turned out differently,” what do you think the narrator wishes she could change? About what is she uncompromising?
- 5 If you read *Small Fires* as a feminist text, what commentaries, critiques, or insights are offered concerning gender identities and roles, the nuclear family structure, social institutions like church and marriage, and/or beliefs about the source and nature of sexual orientation? Can the book itself—or any of the individual essays—be read as having a particular ideological or political message?
- 6 What is the role of material objects in this book? In Mark Doty’s *Still Life with Oyster and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy*, he suggests that objects become endowed with strong emotions and act as physical markers for many invisible, intangible truths. How is this idea reflected in *Small Fires*? What specific objects act as placeholders for larger truths?
- 7 How is “time” marked and explored in these essays? For instance, how do different cultural texts, i.e. books, films, commercials, even turns of phrase and styles of clothing, create a kind of generational perspective from the narrator toward her family and her family toward the narrator? In what sense, if any, are the conflicts in

this book “generational”?

- 8** How is “place” marked and explored in these essays? For instance, in what ways does geographical location, including landscape and weather, influence the narrative(s)? How are familiar places, i.e. movie theaters, public swimming pools, doctors’ offices, elementary school classrooms, used to evoke particular emotion? What details from such settings are especially memorable, even visceral, for you as a reader?
- 9** The word “essay” literally means “to attempt,” and Philip Lopate once extended its meaning even further: “to try, to attempt, to leap experimentally into the unknown.” What do you see the author *attempting* to accomplish in *Small Fires*? What do individual essays attempt to do, and what stylistic similarities and differences do you notice between them? (Are they “leaping experimentally,” and if so, to what effect?)
- 10** One challenge of writing memoir is to show other people in our lives to be as complex and worthy of attention and compassion as we want/believe ourselves to be. What narrative details and/or literary techniques allow you to recognize the complexity of the mother, father, aunt, and grandmother? What interests you about them? When do they seem most like “real people” with whom you can empathize or perhaps to whom you can relate?
- 11** How does the title *Small Fires* speak to the contents of this book? What were your expectations for the book based on its title, and how does your understanding of the title change as a result of having read the book? In other words, what are the literal and symbolic “fires” being explored?
- 12** In your estimation, which essay from the collection most fully embodies the book’s overall themes, message, and literary style? That is, if you had to choose one essay to represent *Small Fires*, which essay would it be, and why?

## Writing Exercises

### Exercise A

In 1998, when I took my first nonfiction class as a sophomore, the professor introduced us to a book by James Hillman called *The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. Early in this book, the author writes: “Our lives may be determined less by our childhoods than by the way we have learned to imagine our childhoods.” Hillman goes on to recount Plato’s Myth of Er and proposes that “we elected the body, the parents, the place, and the circumstances that suited the soul and that, as the myth says, belong to its necessity.” My professor, David Seal, asked us to free-write about why we had chosen our parents—an idea I found absolutely shocking at the time. However, I have used this free-write since and found it incredibly helpful to students. “Why did you *require* your particular body, family, place, and life-circumstances in order to become who you are?” Then, from what is generated in the free-write and discussed in class, students often find a new “triggering town” (to use Richard Hugo’s phrase) that doesn’t appear explicitly in the text but helps them write about family less as “victims” and more as empowered co-writers of their histories.

### Exercise B

Another writing exercise that I like to give myself—and this is especially generative for prose-poetry or micro-essay—is to brainstorm of a list of phrases that I hear a lot in daily life or that I strongly recall from literature, television, or film. Each phrase has to be brief but pithy, a phrase that seems to require some kind of inspection or even talking

back to, but the choice of phrases is best tailored, I think, to phrases the individual finds *personally* compelling. For instance, here are some that I have used: “The rest took place beyond images & stories” (from a cinema theory reader); “Teach me from scratch how to love; keep me kind” (from a Jorie Graham poem); “There’s no hole on earth where the heart drops through without bringing something with it” (from a James Allen Hall poem); “I’m drowning here, & you’re describing the water” (from the film *As Good as It Gets*); and “Skirt the issue” (everyday discourse). I took these, and I used them to generate one-page responses. “Skirt the issue” was especially fun because the phrase always makes me think of issues dressed up with all different kinds of skirts, which led to a kind of list poem incorporating as many different varieties of skirt as I could imagine in conjunction with the wide variety of issues that might need to be “skirted.” So I recommend brainstorming favorite quotes and interesting idioms or even clichéd statements that we tend not to inspect because they seem so commonplace (“heart on the sleeve,” “don’t worry your pretty little head about it,” etc.), and see what kinds of surprising insights and images such a response might generate. The prose-poem/ micro-essay might end up standing alone, or it may lead to richer images and insights to incorporate into a larger piece (or both!).

### Exercise C

And of course, there’s always good, old-fashioned ekphrasis, which is one of my favorite writing exercises. I teach a Creativity & the Arts class where, for instance, I always show my students *The Fall of Icarus* by Brueghel and then have us read Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts.” We look at Nancy Sullivan’s ekphrastic poems in response to Pollock canvases, and we even consider Don McLean’s “Starry, Starry Night” song and lyrics in response to Van Gogh’s famous *The Starry Night*. Back in 2000, when I got my hands on the *Best American Poetry* reader for that year, I was mesmerized by the opening poem—Kim Addonizio’s ekphrastic response to Bergman’s film, *Virgin Spring*. This also broadened my perspective on what kinds of visual media ekphrastic poems could respond to—not just paintings and photographs but also films, television, perhaps even installation art. Drawing from these examples, I like to assign myself to write ekphrastic poems and/or nonfiction reflections based on visual art I have encountered and been especially drawn to. It works well to watch a film at home or visit an online gallery, but more powerful, I find, is to spend an afternoon in an art gallery, identify a few works of art that are especially moving, and begin writing on the spot in that space with the art object at hand. This also works well with public installations where you don’t have to pay admission or worry about hours of operation. Again, these writings may generate stand-alone work or become absorbed into larger projects or both.

The best book I know of on the writing of nonfiction is *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* by Brenda Miller and Susanne Antonetta, which also contains some excellent exercises.

For writing exercises from other Sarabande authors, visit our website at [www.sarabandebooks.org](http://www.sarabandebooks.org).

## Suggested Reading

*Breakfast at the Victory: The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience* by James Carse

*Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid

*This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff

*Firebird and Heaven's Coast* by Mark Doty

*The House on Mango Street* and *Woman-Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde

*Season of the Body* and *Blessing of the Animals* by Brenda Miller

*Truth Serum* and *Maps to Anywhere* by Bernard Cooper

*An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard

*Plainwater* by Anne Carson

*The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* by Toi Derricotte

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston

*A Mind Apart: Travels in a Neurodiverse World* by Susanne Antonetta

*The Next American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata

*Fun Home: A Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel

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The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, supports Sarabande Books with state tax dollars and federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.