

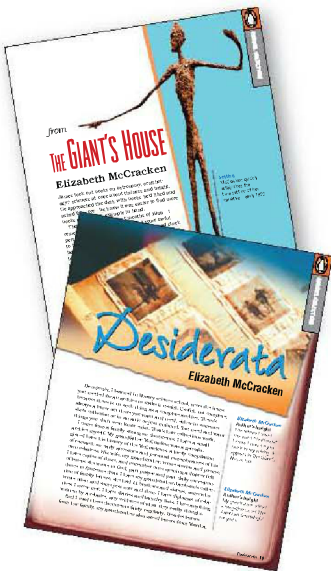


Introduction: Fiction and Nonfiction



Can truth change?

Fiction and nonfiction show us truth in different ways.



What Are Fiction and Nonfiction?

by Elizabeth McCracken

This is how I learned the difference between fiction and nonfiction.

On my 15th birthday I walked into the local public library and demanded a job and wonder of wonders they gave me one. Good thing: most of the jobs my friends had (waitress, camp counselor, ice cream scooper) required eye contact and good balance. I had a terrific knowledge of the alphabet, and a need *not* to look people in the eye. In other words, I was a born shelver.

On-the-Job Training

Fiction is prose writing that tells about imaginary characters and events; **nonfiction** is prose writing that presents information and ideas about real people, places, events, or objects.

My beat was Fiction A–SM, which was in the hallway leading from the circulation desk to the reference room. The library building was old and weird and made of lots of little rooms. Books had to be shelved where they could. Fiction SM–Z, for instance, was in the front room. The majority of shelf space was devoted to nonfiction, the way it is in most libraries.

“Nonfiction was bossy.”

At first I wasn’t interested in nonfiction. Nonfiction was bossy.

Cookbooks, history books, and auto repair manuals told you what happened or they told you what to do. You had to believe it because it was true. How could that compare to my beloved Fiction A–SM? Let’s face it: I wasn’t even interested in Fiction SM–Z. I shelved novels and short story collections, books with black and white skulls on the spine (mysteries) or yellow and red Young Adult stickers.

I was very slow because I kept stopping to read. Somewhere in there, I decided to write a book myself, a novel that one day would be shelved in Fiction A–SM. The only problem was what to write about: I’d had a dull, happy life.

After a while I got faster, and they gave me an additional section to shelve: New Nonfiction. It turned out that I *liked* history books (the 900s), collections of essays (800s), biographies (shelved according to subject), even cookbooks (600s).



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Fictional Characters With Nonfictional Cars

These books made me want to write, too. I could make up characters and then look up what kind of cars they'd drive, what kind of food they'd eat, what kind of clothes they'd wear. Even now, the first thing I do when I start a short story or a novel is to read a nonfiction book on the same subject.



Fiction is a piece of truth
that turns lies to meaning.

from *Skin*
— Dorothy Allison

Meet Elizabeth McCracken (b. 1966)

Author of *The Giant's House* and
"Desiderata"

Elizabeth McCracken, who was a librarian before she became a full-time writer, says she misses working in the library. Her dual identity as novelist and librarian serves her well in her first novel, *The Giant's House* (1996), which depicts a relationship between a librarian and the world's tallest teenager. In explaining her fascination with eccentric characters, she has said, "I believe that most people are extraordinary."

Did You Know?

McCracken confesses that "there are probably more times than I care to admit when I giggle happily at something I've written."

