

Focusing on Flash Nonfiction: An Interview with Dinty Moore

By Jenny Patton

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Dinty W. Moore – editor of *Brevity*, an online literary journal of short nonfiction – recently won the Stanley W. Lindberg Award for Excellence in Literary Editing, an award honoring the memory of the venerable *Georgia Review* editor by recognizing the work over time of an editor who has a record of encouraging excellence in others while producing it in his or her own work.



Beyond his role as editor, Dinty is a writer, teacher, graduate dissertation advisor, director of the Creative Writing Program at Ohio University, AWP board member (and former president), and amateur photographer. Yet the mahatma of flash nonfiction is never too busy to joke with his students and colleagues. He’s “the master of the incisive, sidesplitting remark,” says his student Chris Gillen, who adds that Dinty’s humor teaches as much as it entertains. In the classroom, he creates the perfect blend of constructive criticism and banter, according to student Marianne Janack.

During his summer stint as a literary nonfiction instructor at *Kenyon Review* Writers Workshop, Dinty sat down at the Kenyon Inn in Gambier, Ohio to share his thoughts about the short essay.

What draws you to the short form?

I’ve always liked succinct artwork no matter the form. As a young man I worked not only as a journalist but also as a documentary filmmaker, actor, and experimental modern dancer. Short works always fascinated me in those other arenas, whether a two-minute dance solo or a brief experimental film. There’s a through line of emotion, beauty, and discomfort that can fit into the tiniest of frames. And as a writing instructor, I recognize that the short form is a wonderful teaching tool. You can try a lot of things briefly that you can bring to a project, even if the eventual goal is a book-length memoir.

Why did you choose 750 words as the maximum for *Brevity* submissions?

I wanted to give a word maximum that challenged the writer, and I felt a 500-word maximum was too short and 2,000 words too long. I’ve been amazed over the years by what people have done in under 750 words.

The adage “show don’t tell” is something many readers expect from memoir, yet in more than a few *Brevity* essays – such as “Sam at the Gun Show” by Greg Bottoms – telling is prominent.

The short piece that relies on telling is the exception, I think, but we have published them, and some very good ones. Too much telling is a risky approach. Many pieces we reject want to be fifteen pages long, but, because of word constraints, the author merely summarizes what would have been written in the longer work, and that kind of telling – pure summary – is often dull. Telling isn’t always

bad, however. The writer who is sensitive to word choice and rhythm and the power of the intimate detail can do a lot of telling. There's a difference, too, between telling and explaining. I advise my students to show the most, tell a little bit, and never explain. If a writer has to explain to the reader how to feel about a character or event, that's not a good sign.

What assumptions do others seem to have about flash nonfiction?

Many assume a flash piece is an excerpt from a longer work. Sometimes a significant moment out of a chapter or a long essay can stand alone, but we're getting more and more pieces that clearly could never work in the longer form because the energy of the piece hinges on the rapid fire sharing of information, and the urgency of having to fit it into a frame is what makes it powerful. This is evident, just to name two, in "The Things I've Lost" by Brian Arundel and "Things That Appear Ugly or Troubling but Upon Closer Inspection Are Beautiful" by Gretchen Legler.

What's imperative for a short piece that's different in a longer piece?

The imperatives are the same, but everything is dialed up in a shorter piece. You need to move in and out of scene quickly, you need to introduce language, diction, and rhythm immediately, and you need to establish place, character, and conflict right away – usually in the first sentence. The first paragraph of a brief essay has to do what the first chapter of a memoir does.

Tell me more about what you look for in a *Brevity* essay?

Whatever the piece is exploring – a parent dying from cancer, for example – the essay needs to make me look at the situation or moment differently. I need to learn something. I need to see the world from a fresh perspective. It's not enough, for instance, to learn that the writer misses the deceased parent or resents the illness that took the parent too early. The essay, the discovery moments, have to be more complicated. What does the death reveal about the relationship that existed? In what ways is death a relief, an unburdening, perhaps for the deceased and the family member? Can death be beautiful? What else is happening, besides the death? We have these assumptions about how an adult child should react to a parent's passing, but those assumptions may be all wrong. I like work that digs down into the nitty-gritty of all that, or of whatever subject is under the glass.

You launched *Brevity* in 1997. What has changed since then?

When *Brevity* first started getting noticed, the majority of the pieces were based on scene and detail – nonfiction that read like fiction. Over the years, however, the submissions we've received have pushed the aesthetic further.

Can you expand on that?

It is the writers who started to push the magazine toward the lyric or ruminative essay, to balance out the dominant "scene and detail" approach. The writers came up with lists, braided essays, segmented forms, and other approaches and experiments I simply hadn't anticipated. Sherman Alexie's "Somebody Else's Genocide" is almost an anecdote, but an anecdote powered by underlying issues of race, bigotry, and genocide. The reader makes the leap.

How has your work as editor influenced your writing?

I learn a lot about what's possible in writing from editing this magazine. In the last four years, I've found myself writing briefer pieces. It's shaken me out of my own knee-jerk habit of structuring every essay-length memoir to look like a short story. And even in my longer work, it's made me lean toward a quick opening.

What do you see as the future of short nonfiction?

There are more and more high-quality, carefully edited online journals sprouting up, several focusing on short fiction and nonfiction, and I also see more and more flash nonfiction in the standard, established paper-and-ink journals. Tablet readers like the Nook or iPad will just accelerate this trend, I think. Even *The New York Times*, with the popular "Modern Love" essay each Sunday, is making room for brief memoir.

You've published renowned writers as well as beginners. How are those different for you?

It's a thrill when I publish a well-known writer but almost better to publish a writer at the beginning of his or her career. To see the trajectory of their success – from a literary journal publication to awards and books – is very gratifying. Also, I've appreciated the chance to recommend pieces that weren't right for *Brevity* to other editors.

What are some other journals you recommend for short nonfiction?

There are so many great ones out there, but journals open to flash pieces include *Sweet, Blip*, *Alimentum*, *Fringe Magazine*, *Defunct*, *South Loop Review*, *Flashquake*, *400 Words*, *Underwired Magazine*, *751 Magazine*, *Diagram*, and *The Sun's* "Readers Write" section.

What do you wish you knew when you were starting out as an editor of your own journal?

I wish I knew how much work the magazine would become. I wish I'd been less of a control freak and brought in more people to help me sooner.

What's your advice to emerging creative nonfiction writers?

Focus less on the point you want to make and more on the simple question, "Do I have a good story to tell?" Be a storyteller first, and an advocate, or literary stylist, or provocateur, or what have you, second. Writers often provide too much information. I don't want to be lectured to or treated like a child who needs to learn the moral of a story. I want to be pulled into the writing by a magnetic force that won't let go until the final word.

Dinty W. Moore, is author of *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, as well as the memoir *Between Panic & Desire*, winner of the Grub Street Nonfiction Book Prize in 2009. He worked briefly as a police reporter, a documentary filmmaker, a modern dancer, a zookeeper, and a Greenwich Village waiter, before deciding he was lousy at all of those jobs and really wanted to write memoir and short stories. Moore has published essays and stories in *The Southern Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Harpers*, *The New York Times Sunday*

Magazine, The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, Gettysburg Review, Utne Reader, and Crazyhorse, among numerous other venues.