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Characters and Topical Diversity

A Trend in the Nonfiction Bestseller

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the difference between the bestseller and the non-bestseller in nonfiction. It is noticed that many bestsellers in nonfiction belongs to the sub-genre of creative nonfiction, but also that the topics in this kind of literature is largely ignored by the critics. Thus, the article tests how topics may work in creative nonfiction. Two Danish bestsellers belonging to the genre, Frank's *Mit smukke genom* (*My Beautiful Genome*), about genomics, and Buk-Swienty's *Slagtebænk Dybbøl* (*'Slaughter-bench Dybbøl'*), a history book, are chosen as cases and analysed using a slightly modified motif model by Johansen. The result is that in both books the main topic is treated from a double perspective, but also that six out of seven secondary topics, or motifs, are treated as well. It is concluded that also in a topical sense creative nonfiction may span traits from nonfiction and fiction, and that this may contribute to our understanding between the bestseller and the non-bestseller in nonfiction.

Keywords Creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, bestsellers, literary motifs, literary characters.

Introduction

Usually bestsellers mean bestsellers in fiction, but of course nonfiction has its bestsellers too. These bestsellers may roughly be divided into two major groups, one of which serves practical needs (for example, travel guides or books about gardening, pregnancy and so forth). Titles of this type are rarely found on the bestseller lists, but because they meet practical needs, they often become steady-sellers and gain impressive sales figures over time.

The other group is different. These books enter the bestseller lists shortly after being published, stay there for a few months or in a few cases remain there for a year or two, and then the public demand declines pretty fast. This pattern indicates that the main attraction of these books is not that they serve practical needs. Of course, they may serve some readers' needs, for example, professional needs, but in order to become must-reads for a much wider audience, it is obvious that they have something else to offer. A lot of people do not *need* to read these books; still they buy them. Otherwise, they would not be bestsellers.

Many of the books in this group belong to the flourishing umbrella genre called either creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, or narrative nonfiction. As Lee Gutkind, founder of the literary magazine *Creative nonfiction*, founder of the first MFA program in creative nonfiction in the world, and author of several books about the genre, explains: "Creative nonfiction has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities. These days the biggest publishers – HarperCollins, Random House, Norton, and others – are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry" (Gutkind, 2013). In accordance with the various genre terms, creative nonfiction is definitely a very literary kind of nonfiction, and in the United States, it is possible to earn a fellowship in creative nonfiction from the National Endowments of the Arts, but many of the titles, for example, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henriette Lacks*, Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, John McPhee's *Coming into the Country*, and Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*, also entered the bestseller lists and some of them stayed there for years.

However, it seems that the very artfulness of the genre also means that most writers writing about the genre are mostly concerned with form, style and sub-genre issues, while the topical content is largely ignored, except that it should be “documentable” (Lounsberry, 1990, p. xi) or at least true (for example, Gutkind, 2012, p. 14-43). A book like Jack Hart’s *Storycraft: the Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* includes chapters on for instance ‘Structure’, ‘Voice and Style’, ‘Scene’ and even ‘Theme’ (Hart, 2011), but neither this book nor the popular anthology *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (Root and Steinberg, eds., 2012) include a substantial chapter or essay on the treatment of topics in creative nonfiction. This is interesting because in literary theory, it is taken for granted that form and content are intertwined, that is, when the form changes something happens to the content, and vice versa. If this is true, topics do not work in the same way in creative nonfiction as they do in other kinds of nonfiction, and in order to test this thesis, two cases of creative nonfiction from the Danish best-seller lists have been selected for closer inspection. Of course, two cases cannot show much about how a genre works in general and surely more studies of this kind are needed. Still, I think the findings are interesting.

The first case is Lone Frank’s *Mit smukke genom* (*My Beautiful Genome*), on genetics, or actually state-of-the-art genomics. The other case is Tom Buk-Swienty’s *Slagtebænk Dybbøl* (not translated into English, but the title reads ‘*Slaughter-bench Dybbøl*’), a history book about a particular battle in the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864. Given these topics, the books were hardly predestined to become bestsellers. Still, in Denmark *My Beautiful Genome* has been a solid bestseller, printed in six impressions, while *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* became an extraordinary bestseller, printed in twenty-one impressions – and of course both books have been published in numerous other formats, too. Both authors also received the Danish Author’s Guild Prize in nonfiction for these books, Buk-Swienty in 2009, Frank in 2011 (Dansk Forfatterforening, [n.d.]). Moreover, the most expensive television serial ever produced in Denmark, scheduled to hit the screen in 2014, is strongly inspired by *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* and its sequel, *Dommedag Als* (*Doomsday Als*). Internationally, Frank’s book has been the more successful, translated into six

foreign languages, including English and German, while Buk-Swienty's book has only been translated into German.

Now, the core question is: Can the study of the topical content of *My Beautiful Genome* and *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* contribute to our understanding of the difference between the nonfiction bestseller and nonfiction books with more humble sales figures? Of course, there might be many other important issues at stake too. Some books are better promoted than others; some get a lot of (good) reviews, others do not; some have a cover that catches the attention of the book buying public, others do not; some books are written in a style that appeals to many readers, others do not; and so on. But, after all, the topics and how they are treated may also be very important.

The theoretical approach is based on a model roughly outlining the main motifs in fiction. At first sight this may seem an odd choice since the two cases are not fiction, but the point is that the topics of creative nonfiction often are doubled up in order to match topics in ordinary nonfiction as well as motifs in fiction, and the chosen model can grasp both those dimensions. The model was originally conceived by the Danish professor in Literature, Jørgen Dines Johansen, but I have slightly modified it.

A motif model for fiction

According to Johansen, fiction basically deals with five main motifs. These are as follows:

The individual's relation to

- the body
- the mind
- the other, the object(s) for desire
- the others
- exterior nature

(Johansen, 2007, p. 278; my translation)

Johansen's first and quite startling point is that these motifs are simply the same as the main motifs in real life. Real persons are concerned with themselves (the first two categories), their relations to other people (the next two categories), and their relations to exterior nature (the final category). That is, these motifs are existential, but

also essential, and that is why fiction is concerned with the same motifs. His second point is that a single work of fiction can easily embody *all* of these motifs. I have tested this hypothesis on dozens of fictional texts, and it seems to be true that fiction, even a single short story, often thematize three, four or in fact all of these motifs, although usually some motifs are much more important than others. And obviously his final point is that these motifs all are relational. It is not the individual that matters, nor is it the objects in themselves. What matters is the fictional character's *relation* to the object. Fiction is not only anthropocentric but subjectivistic. How the world is perceived and how the individual relates to the world is more important and more 'real' than the world itself. Epistemological matters are rarely discussed explicitly in fiction, but in general fiction displays a phenomenological approach to the world and what reality is.

On the other hand, in nonfiction in general and in scientific publications in particular, it is common to deal with just a single topic and the treatment of this topic does not have to be related to humans at all. Of course, there are exceptions; in biographies, memoirs, travel books and personal essays, the topics are almost always related to the author or other persons in the book. However, reading a book about a particular topic, birds, for instance, you are supposed to learn something about birds, but you do not necessarily learn anything about anybody's, not even the author's, *relation* to birds. If the model is applied on a book like this, it is obvious that it should be categorised as 'exterior nature', but humans, not to mention particular individuals, need not to be a part of it as such. Compared to fiction, nonfiction in general is rather objectivistic. It is the topic in itself that matters and that is why the individual's relation to the topic is often ignored.

However, it could be argued that exactly 'exterior nature' is a very comprehensive and possibly a somewhat confusing category in Johansen's interpretation because it does not only include physical nature but also the metaphysical, for example, God. Moreover, Johansen does not distinguish between nature itself and what we as human beings do to this nature when 'things', such as merchandise, are produced, nor are more intangible concepts like 'society' or 'culture' discussed, but just like things, the very content of society and culture is also manmade. Thus, I have divided 'exterior nature' into

three new categories and labeled them myself. For the sake of clarification, a few words have been changed elsewhere in the model, too. The result is the following seven motifs:

The individual's (or character's) relation to

- his or her own body
- his or her own mind
- the other, the object(s) for desire
- other human beings
- non-human nature
- things and society and culture at large
- the metaphysical

Now, what happens when this model is applied on the two cases?

My Beautiful Genome

In library catalogues *My Beautiful Genome* is usually classified as genetics or genomics, concepts that unfortunately are to some extent difficult to fit into the model (which, by the way, is quite an unusual thing). The problem is this: Is the topic simply Lone Frank's own genome, that is, a part of her own body and maybe even her own mind? Is the topic the genomes of human beings in general? If so, the category of 'other human beings' is relevant. Is the topic actually the social regulations of the scientific research and business in genomics, or maybe the 'culture' signifying this particular field? If so, the category of 'society and culture at large' is at stake. Or does the term 'genetics' mean that the topic is also non-human nature, that is, genes of animals? And finally the most important question: Is Frank concerned with these topics in their own right, or is it her own or other individual's *relation* to the topics that really matters?

The answer is that she is concerned with most of it. Being a book about genomics and not genetics on a general level, it is not about non-human nature, but she is certainly writing about humans genomes in general, the social and cultural circumstances are treated both explicitly and implicitly, and she is particularly interested in her own genome, and even more so: Her *relation* to her genome.

At the end of the prologue, outlining her plans for her journey into her own genome, she writes: "Of course, I will ask the experts for advice. Let state-of-the-art scientists interpret the text. But the

most important question I'll have to answer for myself. And that is how it *feels* to have a close encounter with your own DNA – this invisible, digital self that lies curled up like a fetus in every single cell of my body" (Frank, 2010, p. 21; my translation).¹

Obviously, Frank has two major purposes with her book, and this explains why the text throughout the book time and again switches between more or less objective information on frontline research in genomics and a highly personal account about her encounter with her own DNA and her thoughts and feelings in regard to this new information. That is, one part of the book treats a topic in the traditional nonfictional or even scientific way, while another part exhibits a personal and relational motif just like autobiographies or fiction. This article is not concerned with style, but it can hardly surprise that the treatment of the general topic is factual and not literary, while the personal motif often is treated in scenes and in a significantly more personal and literary language. In other words, she is also switching between 'telling' and 'showing'.

However, the single most interesting point may be that Frank does not stop with the human genomes and her reaction to her own tests, because almost all motifs in the model are present in her book:

- Yes, it is about her relation to her body. Not just the genome in its own right, also what she thinks about her face, her breasts, and so on.
- Yes, it is about her relation to her mind. For instance, what she used to believe in and what she believes in now, and why.
- Yes, it is about her relation to 'the other', particularly her Dad, but to a lesser degree also her Mum, her brother, and her boyfriend.
- Yes, it is about her relations to humanity at large, and it is quite obvious that these relations are often tense.
- And to a lesser degree it is also about her relation to non-human nature (such as her passion for biology) and society and culture at large.

Thus, the only absent motif is her relation to the metaphysical, and overall it is not easy to decide if it is the scientific topic or the abundance of personal motifs that matters the most. It depends on the point-of-view and that may be at least one reason why the book

turned into a bestseller. As noticed above, *My Beautiful Genome* is usually classified as genetics or genomics in library catalogues, but according to the reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*, it is rather “a probing biological memoir” (Oneworld, [n.d.]). Both classifications make sense, but none of them are adequate for the book as a whole, and the point is that it is possible to read it either way.

Slaughter-bench Dybbøl

As already mentioned, the obvious topic of Buk-Swienty’s *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is a particular battle in the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864. In terms of the model, this topic belongs basically to ‘things and society and culture at large’ – in a historical context, of course. This war has already been treated in numerous other books and to a certain degree also Buk-Swienty addresses traditional issues like the political situation before and after the war, how and why the battle was won by the Prussians, and so on.

However, libraries and archives store surprising amounts of personal accounts about this war and even that particular battle – diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographical novels, and more – and these documents turn out to be just as important as more official and political documents. In the preface to the book, Buk-Swienty reveals that he himself grew up in Sønderborg not far from Dybbøl and in his childhood as well as an adult he has often thought: “Who *were* these men? What did they *really* experience those days in April in 1864? What does it mean to be right in the middle of a battlefield – and to top it all, a battlefield that decisively changed our history?” (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 18; my translation). The personal documents serve to answer questions like these; they are tools to get into the minds of historical persons long gone. Actually, this approach is reflected in the very title of the book: “Slaughter-bench Dybbøl” was simply the wording the soldiers used to describe the battle they participated in. In other words, *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is not just a history book about the battle on a more or less objective or scientific level, it is just as much about how people living in that time *related* to it.

But the heavy use of personal documents and books also imply that other motifs in the model are touched upon. The account of the German war painter Wilhelm Camphausen’s experiences on the battlefield the day after the battle may serve as an example. Based

on the painter's autobiography the narrative takes off when Camphausen "shivering and hesitating" steps forward to the first dead bodies lying outstretched on the ground. At first he can hardly look at them, but in a short while he is able to meet the challenge.

Surprisingly, I experienced how incredibly fast the feelings of human beings can be blunted faced with the terrible and shocking [...]. Then I took my pencil and started making the first sketches of characteristic groups of dead bodies; by now all my disgust had disappeared. I only noticed the sad mess of limbs as curves and straight lines I should imitate as if I was just sketching a table or a chair. I [...] do not dare to think about how emotionally cold the soldier must be, seeing scenes like these so often.

Finally, he enters other parts of the battlefield while describing the dead bodies in a very detailed, apparently objective, manner (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 322; my translations).

These events, as well as Camphausen's thoughts and feelings, have everything to do with the war, of course, but in terms of the model, it is very interesting that Camphausen also relates to his own mind and what his state of mind does to his body. The 'I' is watching the 'me', you might say; he is self-reflexive. Moreover, he also relates to the minds of the soldiers, something he cannot see. Finally, the topic of art is introduced.

Though in some respects this account may be outstanding, it still signifies the approach in the book overall. The most important topics are definitely the war and how different individuals related to it, but as far as the sources allow, it is obvious that Buk-Swienty tries to include other topics and motifs as well. When the model is applied on the text as a whole, it could be argued that the result is as follows:

- No, the characters relation to their own body is hardly there at all. Camphausen is definitely an exception. Since many soldiers lost a limb, this is surprising, but possibly the sources did not include other descriptions of that motif.
- Yes, to a lesser degree some of the characters relate to their own mind.

- Yes, the relation to 'the other', that is, particularly wife and children, is rather prominent in many of the quoted letters.
- Yes, relations to other human beings are frequently mentioned, but actually it is mostly the observers and not the soldiers who state this motif. How the individual soldiers related to other soldiers is hardly to be found.
- Yes, the relation to non-human nature is present. Particularly the weather and even the sound of larks seem to be important.
- Yes, as noticed above, the topic of the individual's relation to 'things and society and culture at large' is one of the two main topics in the book. In terms of the model the other main topic is simply 'things and society and culture at large', in a non-relational way.
- And yes, the metaphysical in the form of God is frequently mentioned, especially in the letters the soldiers write home to their families.

Again only a single motif is absent. In Frank's book, it was the relation to the metaphysical, in Buk-Swienty's book, it is the relation to the body that is (almost) missing.

Characters, topics and motifs

Now, comparing the two books, it can be concluded that in some respects they are very different. Buk-Swienty, holding a MA in History, writes about a long gone past, while Frank, holding a Ph.D. in Neurobiology, writes about genomics, and she is much more concerned about the present and the future than the past. Also, Frank writes scenes with a lot of dialogue and interior monologue, while the scenes in *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* lacks those features, more than anything probably because Buk-Swienty is not 'allowed' to do so. Although parts of his book may look like a historical novel, ultimately, it is not fiction. And a final example: While Frank strongly thematizes herself, even exhibits herself and appears to be a very outspoken personality, Buk-Swienty stays humble in the background as far as the narrative goes. When he analyses the events, his own voice is heard, of course, but *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is not a personal book like *My Beautiful Genome*.

However, the two books also share many characteristics, the most significant being that the main topic is treated from a double

perspective and that both books use nearly every motif in the model. Concerning the first of these issues, both authors are obviously very conscious about what they do. The topics of genomics and the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864 are treated in their own right in a serious, even academic, manner, but how these topics are or were perceived by particular persons, which feelings they generate, are equally important. In *My Beautiful Genome*, the issue is very much what her personal tests means to Lone Frank, and in *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl*, it is mostly what the battle meant to particular persons a long time ago, but that difference is probably not too important to the reader, because no matter the case it is perfectly possible to think: 'What if it was me?' Exactly this kind of identification was obviously one of Buk-Swienty's purposes with his narrative: "We listen to their thoughts and feelings about participating in the war. And we watch through their eyes and we perceive with their senses" (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 9; my translation).

Concerning the second issue, the comprehensive use of motifs from the model, it is not evident if this was a conscious choice or not. Maybe it was just something that happened more or less spontaneously, but if so, I think the single most important reason why it happened is in both cases the creation of *rounded characters*. As noticed above, Buk-Swienty is limited by his sources, but obviously he is trying to create as rounded characters as possible and this ambition requires that they relate to different things. If they only relate to one thing – the war, for instance – the characters would be considered 'flat' or 'two-dimensional', and it is difficult for the reader to identify with such characters. And surely the only rounded character in *My Beautiful Genome* is Frank herself, but it is also her relation to the different categories in the model that saves the outcome since all the other characters are rather flat. In other words, there seems to be a strong connection between the use of rounded characters and the use of motifs.

So why did *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* and *My Beautiful Genome* turn into bestsellers? The question may still be difficult to answer, but I guess it is quite obvious that both cases have at least two main attractions: They offer factual, even scientific, information, and they offer an aesthetical reading experience. However, given that the basic structure of topics and motifs in the two books are very similar, it is also possible to be a little more exact than that: A

topic is treated in its own right just like in other kinds of nonfiction; this topic is perceived by rounded and trustworthy characters, whom the reader can identify with or at least can relate to, just like in fiction; and in order to create these rounded characters, numerous other motifs are stated as well, just like in fiction – and in real life. Apparently, a lot of book customers find this combination attractive.

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Notes

- 1 The official translation does not stress the scientific aspect quite as much, nor is 'feels' in italics: 'I want to go in search of some answers to these questions, and to try to find the limit to which we're willing to probe our futures – *my* future. I want to know how it feels to have a close encounter with my DNA – this invisible, digital self that lies curled up like a fetus in every single cell of my body" (Frank, 2011, p. 10).