WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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It turns out there is an awful lot inside a name.

In 1903, in the February issue of *The Library World*, a leading journal on library management at that time, the head of a public library in Hampstead, England, published an article titled “The Fiction Nuisance and Its Abatement.” William Doubleday was well-respected among his fellow librarians in England. He’d written a couple books on library science, as well as a decent work of criticism on Keats. So his article attracted some attention when it appeared.

“The Public Library is primarily educational in its work,” Doubleday wrote. “Education is in the air, and with its efficiency is bound up the welfare of the nation.”

At stake for Doubleday — besides the welfare of England — were the delicately impressionable minds of public library patrons, whom Doubleday noticed were starting to inquire about novels more than anything else at their libraries’ information booths. Doubleday suggests that as many as 80 percent of patrons were now inquiring about fiction over other kinds of literature, adding that “we recognise that whilst some novels have positive value, others are at best harmless.”

Hostility toward fiction was nothing new at the turn of the century. For hundreds of years throughout the English-speaking world, the growing popularity of fiction incited debates about the legitimacy of the genre: Would novels corrupt a nation’s youth, did they deserve a place in libraries, were they even worth the paper they were printed on? Etc.

And on each of these questions Doubleday insists the answer is no. He does acknowledge that a library completely devoid of fiction would be shirking its duties as a cultural institution (“fancy a library without ‘Don Quixote,’ with no Scott, no Jane Austen, no Thackeray, no Dickens!”), but he nonetheless insists that the genre is not as serious or as important as others. Literature that is truly worthy of our time, he writes, “is a special form of literature
read by young men.” Why by young men? Because studious and serious young male readers “recognize the sternness of the battle of life,” and they therefore “are resolutely preparing to face it” by applying themselves exclusively to “serious reading.”

Doubleday never defines what he means by “serious” or “special” — nor why he thinks young men are its only admirers — but he nevertheless makes clear that fiction is not it. “The more elderly folk are, as a rule,” he explains, “too hard-worked through the day to want to grapple with problems in their scanty hours of ease,” which is why he places the fault for fiction’s popularity squarely with those “leisured or semi-leisured people who not only confine themselves to works of fiction, but read them with astonishing haste and vigour. Materfamilias and her daughters, with some of the other sex, are to be found changing their novels three or four times a week with a zeal truly admirable were it employed in a better cause.”

To help set the nation straight in terms of its reading tastes, Doubleday proposes that librarians start discouraging patrons from reading fiction by actively suggesting that they read something else:

Selections of any books but novels may be produced upon request for the reader’s choice . . .

or,

In some libraries, borrowers have been allowed open access to all the bookshelves except those containing novels . . .

or,

One common plan has been to allow borrowers to use a supplementary ticket, ‘not available for works of fiction’ . . .

and,

Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases

— all of which Doubleday says he has tried at his own library, but with varying degrees of failure. “It is sad,” he reports, “but not altogether surprising, to have to confess that most of the confirmed novel-readers are quite impervious to such
allurements, and to reach them something more drastic will have to be tried.”

Doubleday goes on to propose a bigger scheme in his article, but I’d rather not follow him down that hole. My interest in Doubleday lies in that final suggestion that he makes, which appears on page 207 in *The Library World*, volume V, issue 56, February 1903: “Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases.” According to some linguists, this might be the very first use of the term “non-fiction” in the English language.

Now, before we lay a plaque here, it’s worth noting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the term “non-fiction” wasn’t actually used until six years later in a different publication, *The Westminster Gazette*, in which a librarian reporting from a South African town claims to have succeeded in circulating a larger percentage of “non-fiction” and “more serious books — science, art, travel, biography, history, philosophy, essays, and the like — than novels.”

But whichever publication wants to take the credit, it’s clear that “non-fiction” emerged as a term among librarians in response to the perceived threat that fiction posed at the turn of the century in England.

Let me suggest that we forget the fact that Doubleday doesn’t seem to have coined the term “non-fiction” in order to help him passionately explore the nooks and crannies of a peculiar new literary form, but rather so that he may dismissively refer with catchall efficiency to “everything that is not fiction.”

And let’s forget that every literary form that’s included in that catchall — “science, art, travel, biography, history, philosophy, essays, and the like” — has its own origin story, as well as a complex aesthetic history that has developed over centuries, making it nearly impossible to reasonably conflate any one form in that list with anything else in the list.

And let’s finally try to forget that if “fiction” comes from *fictio*, the Latin word for “make,” then “non-fiction” essentially means “not art,” precluding as it does the possibility of doing what art is supposed to do: make.

Instead, what bothers me most about the term “non-fiction” is that it emerged as a tool to defend provincialism — not to mention misogyny — and like most apophatic terms its purpose was entirely negative from the start, deployed by a didactic man with a small plot of turf he wanted to defend, interested less in celebrating what this genre actually is than in demarcating a
border across which nothing else could pass.

Somehow, however, within the span of a single century, “non-fiction” has overshadowed half a dozen other literary terms to become the bland *de facto* banner that flaps above everything from journalism to memoir, imposing the same aesthetic standards and expectations on everything that falls beneath its shadow.

I am writing beneath its shadow now, in fact. As the director of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa, I grapple with the implications of the term on a daily basis. Whether it’s dealing with inquiries from people who want me to proofread their cookbooks, or battling with university administrators so that my “non-fiction” students can receive the same “arts” fellowships as poetry and fiction students, by accepting the term “non-fiction” our community signals to the world that what goes on in this genre is at best utilitarian and at worst an utter mystery. I doubt any of us in the genre intended this to happen, but our adoption of “non-fiction” has done to our genre exactly what Doubleday had hoped it would: it has segregated us from art.

So a couple of years ago, when the editor of *Seneca Review* pointed out that I’d been editing the journal’s lyric essays for about fifteen years, I asked if he’d give me his blessings to teach a yearlong course about *Seneca*, in which my class would explore how relevant lyric essays still are. From January 2013 through December 2013, my graduate students and I read and discussed every lyric essay that has appeared in *Seneca Review*, noting recurring trends, my embarrassing editorial ticks, and any peculiar aesthetic anomalies that emerged throughout the years, all in an effort to try to figure out what the lyric essay is, how it might be different from other sorts of “nonfiction,” and whether there’s still a place for such a thing in our culture.

And to help make our classroom conversations a little more consequential, I asked *Seneca* if it would allow the students to select their favorite fifteen essays from the journal, conduct interviews with the authors of all the selected texts, write their own critical essays to accompany each selection, and then package it all together in a special volume of *Seneca*. The result is now in your hands: a special issue of *Seneca* that is doubling as a book, and a book that has recorded our extraordinary year together.

A lot of students came to the course with suspicions about “lyric essays,” and by the end of the year I think as many of them had become born-again believers as others had flipped over to
skepticism. And that’s the point. We ought to be questioning all of the ways that we talk about this art form — from the various names we give it, to the parameters that we think our texts ought to follow. We don’t have a solid history of criticism in this genre. So what we think of it, and what we make of it, and what we know of it is up to us. If we want off the sidelines of literary history, we need to start producing our own criticism about the genre.

And then perhaps we ought to consider changing the genre’s name.