

A Life in Fact

by Abby Seiff

Robert Vare and creative writing at the U of C

For most students the name Robert Vare is little more than a familiar chime; the sort of string of words heard in passing only often enough to generate a sense of vague recollection. Even for those who can associate the name with something concrete—a set preceding a title given to the nonfiction writers who, one quarter a year, trek up to Chicago and teach—the man in possession of the name remains indefinite: another Henry Crown, Silas Cobb, or Gertrude Dudley, someone encapsulated into theoretical entity more than physical being. Robert Vare, University alumnus, *Atlantic Monthly* editor at large, founder and namesake of the Robert Vare Nonfiction Writer-in-Residence program, is unquestionably the latter. And for the third time in half an hour I have hung up on him.

Vare and I spoke late last November; he on the East Coast, on the heels of the Atlantic's highly-publicized move from Boston to D.C., I on the third floor of the GSB—a site, as it would turn out, not famed for its cell phone reception. I stared down at the business students pawing through the *Wall Street Journal*, grouped around laptops, while Vare expressed his hope that the program, now in its sixth year, would reach out to the larger University population.

"What I think we're trying to do, more and more, is to make sure we're communicating with the entire student body," Vare said, trying to tamp down excitement. "Sounds great," I said, trying not to blink.

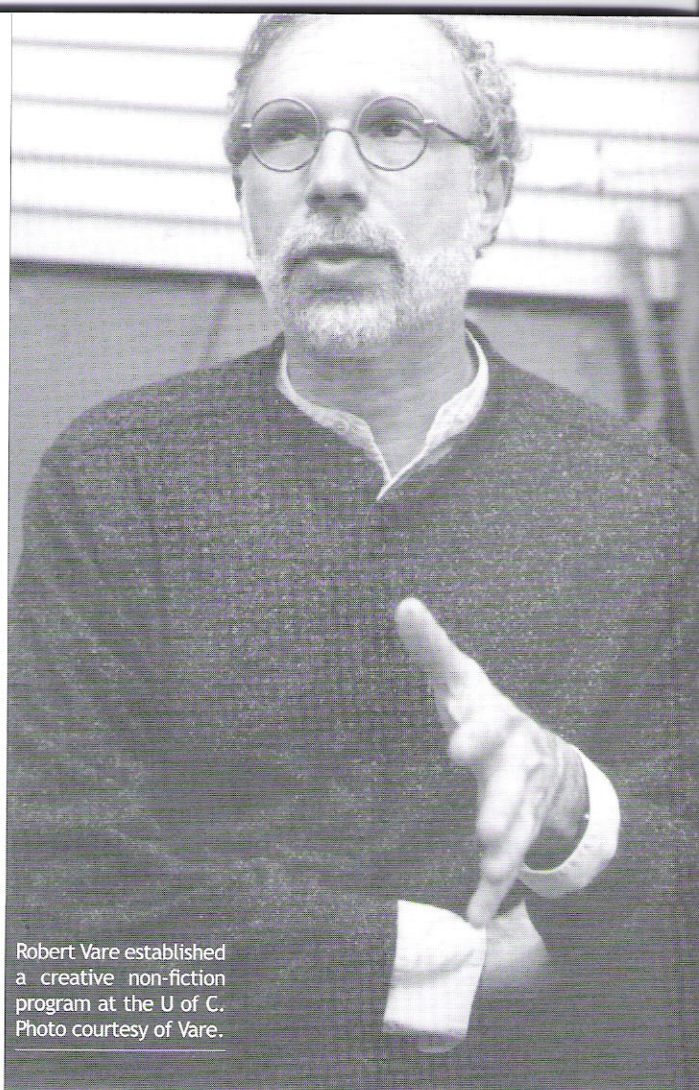
When Vare received his degree from the University in 1967, there existed nothing even vaguely resembling his program. There was no creative writing department; there was no chance to submit stories in lieu of academia for English honors and there were certainly no faculty members espousing the latest techniques of narrative nonfiction on

the University's dime.

"I often lamented the fact that as a student I never had the opportunity to take these kinds of advanced writing courses," he paused. "At least it would have saved a lot of years of figuring things out by trial and error. Most of my early education in nonfiction writing just came through my own reading."

But if one had to learn narrative nonfiction solely through reading, he'd be hard pressed to find a better set of teachers than those who were being published at the time. In Vare's senior year alone, Joan Didion was entrenched in the Haight-Ashbury chronicling lives most people didn't realize could exist; Hunter Thompson was likely still recovering from a beating at the hands of the Hells Angels he'd been following around for story material; Michael Herr was falling apart in Vietnam and posting plagued reports back to *Esquire* magazine.

In probable overromanticization, I imagine that when not camping on the quads to register for classes or storming the admin building to protest war, Vare spent the majority of his formative college years



Robert Vare established a creative non-fiction program at the U of C. Photo courtesy of Vare.

parked in some reading room, pouring over dog-eared copies of *GQ* and *Esquire*, thumbing through *Life* and *Sports Illustrated*: magazines known now primarily for glossy photos or salacious models, but known then for producing some of the finest journalism of their time. These publications were ground zero for narrative nonfiction. Flush with subscribers and money, editors happily funded their writers' cross-country trailings of motorcyclists and stalkings of baseball stars, regularly printing fifteen, twenty, and thirty-thousand-word pieces. Readers meanwhile ate it up.

Sometime in the late eighties, however, the industry began to shift. Advertising moved to TV, budgets shrank. "A lot of editors were under extreme financial pressure," explained Vare. "The editors of general-interest magazines began to focus their publications around stories that were easier to produce: shorter and therefore cheaper." With widespread popularization of computers and video games, faith in the public's appetite for or sheer ability to read a lengthy piece plummeted. The rallying cry of the once mighty publications seemed to have become KISS (Keep it Simple [for the] Stupid.)

In the nineties, after stints at the *New York Times Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*, Vare found himself a high-ranking editor at the *New Yorker* under combative editor-in-chief, Tina Brown. The magazine that had once tossed an issue's worth of content in favor of publishing John Hersey's *Hiroshima* in its entirety was now shrinking pieces for mass digestibility; at one point going so far as to "put a cap of 6000 words, no matter how important." In a campaign that is criticized to this day, Brown worked to cut back article length until "there was no space to develop any story much beyond its essential newsworthiness. She was trying to turn the *New Yorker* into a newsweekly with brand-name writers. I thought the strategy was a mistake," Vare said.

Both editors ended up leaving the *New Yorker*, but Vare's experience, along with a historical faith in the genre, left its mark; if the state of narrative nonfiction is today so much more promising, it is largely indebted to *The Atlantic's* renewed consideration of the genre. Shortly after September 11 the magazine ran a number of lengthy, in-depth, time- and resource-consuming pieces—the likes of which hadn't been popular for years. One, Mark Bowden's extensive profile of

Previous Robert Vare Nonfiction Writers-in-Residence and selected works:

- 2001- Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Taught: "The Art and Craft of Storytelling"
- 2002- Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in The Other America*. Taught: "Telling Stories: The Art of Narrative Non-Fiction"
- 2003-David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez*,

Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina and Richard Farina. Taught: "The Art of Nonfiction Literature"

• 2004-Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*

• 2005-Darcy Frey, *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams*. Taught: "The Art of Narrative Nonfiction"

• 2006-Dava Sobel, *The Planets*. Taught: "Writing About Science"

Saddam Hussein, "driven by anecdote and pure narrative storytelling," remains the most requested piece on *The Atlantic's* website. Another, William Langewiesche's "American Ground" series on the rescue and cleanup operation, an illuminating set of reports from a writer embedded at Ground Zero for nine months, garnered astonishing acclaim and sales.

"It turned out there really is an appetite for this kind of writing when it's well-executed. There's this theory that readers don't have the time for or interest in these elaborately detailed, slow building works. It's clearly wrong," Langewiesche's pieces (each originally in excess of twenty thousand words) were released as a book the following year. Bowden's article made it into *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* 2003.

Six years ago, right around the time he was starting the nonfiction program at Chicago, Vare gave a speech at a Harvard panel entitled "The State of Narrative Nonfiction Writing." The state, as it turned out, was discouraging. "I think it would be hard to argue with the conclusion that magazines have essentially abdicated their traditional role as custodians of this form," Vare said at the time. The tide has since turned. Books, long the only plausible outlet for ambitious works of nonfiction, once again share center stage with publications as "homes of serious narrative nonfiction."

Meanwhile, Vare's project may very well inspire the next generation that occupies the ranks of narrative nonfiction publications. Or at least create a population of informed, able readers—an audience "eager for the pleasures to be had from marrying the techniques of

fiction to fact-based journalism."

"I want to be realistic about what this course can do," Vare told me early on. "Are we going to promise that at the end of the quarter every student is going to be able to write for the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic*?" Unrealistic. Instead, in true life-of-the-mind fashion, Vare desires a program with holistic implications: "I hope by the end of the quarter students will be able to assess their own work as well as the work of others. It's an invaluable skill even for those who don't turn out to be writers. It gives people the tools to be more astute readers."

Last quarter the program was host to several firsts; Dava Sobel, author of the best-sellers *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter*, became the first female recipient of the Vare title, her class became the first to focus on science-writing. "I'm hoping to get a whole different part of the University involved," Vare said at the time. He succeeded. For almost certainly the first time, a class under the Creative Writing rubric was composed mainly of science concentrators.

When Vare and I talked last November, it was before the names James Frey and JT LeRoy had become buzzwords for the limitations and for the stresses of nonfiction. We chatted about Gay Talese and John McPhee, and magazines and classes, and I found myself pulled in by the hopefulness of Vare's mission. The GSBers were padding around down below and it seemed at the time as though they and the poets, the English majors and the pre-meds, could only benefit from an opportunity to immerse themselves in that world of nonfiction. As though there could be no downside. ♦