

Margo Jefferson, on accepting her award for the Rathbones Folio Prize Book of the Year for *Constructing a Nervous System*, said:

I feel very lucky to be a non-fiction writer. You can tell by the word 'non-fiction' that there's a bit of a struggle with it; it's such a bland term, a cautious term –stuck saying what it's not. But it holds worlds as we learn more about what we write; its past, present, future - so many 'heres' to explore and so many 'elsewheres'.

For this book my 'heres' and 'elsewheres' belong to memoir and criticism. In the book I call memoir 'a present negotiating the versions of your past for a future you're willing to show up in'. More expansively, I called it a 'temperamental and cultural biography'; the cultural is where criticism made its presence felt. The objects, the materials, the sights, the sounds, the sensations of art and culture - even in its seemingly meanest form - they're essential to what each of us calls 'identity'. A personal history; that inner life is as crucial to our identities as family, geography, sociology, politics.

So, I didn't want a unified self or a unified language in the book, which these other larger forms can impose. I wanted a hybrid mix of pleasure, anger, praise, grief, analysis, impulse, and confrontation. To quote Marianne Moore (though she was writing on poetry): 'Ecstasy affords the occasion, and expediency determines the form'. I'm hijacking her words for non-fiction. Terror - as well as ecstasy - affords the occasion; love, eros, anger, speculation and a kind of curiosity that can thwart all the principles you're most at ease with. I wanted this narrative of self to have multiple voices that could engage so intimately with the legacies of disparate - even almost 'enemy' - writers, singers, dancers and intellectuals. I intended to use these creators and my own repertory of selves to engage with the facts and phantoms of race, class, and gender.

So here I stand tonight in the glow of the Rathbones Folio Prize. This is a writers' prize. I will say it again - This is a Writers' Prize; nothing is more precious than knowing that other writers take their time, their energy and imagination to really appreciate what I - what me, what every writer in this room - have tried and will keep trying, and hoping so much, to do. Thank you, thank you and thank you!

A transcript of Margo Jefferson's speech as delivered at the British Library, London, Monday 27th March 2023.