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"Some harm, some foul": The editor's duty of care in minimising the potential harm of creative nonfiction that contains problematic or distressing material

Abstract:

The popular Americanism, "no harm, no foul", was first used in basketball when the play in question caused no physical harm. Today, the expression is used to suggest that, if no one has been harmed by a misdeed, the "foul" should be excused. Kate Clanchy's controversial memoir, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (2019), caused considerable psychological harm to readers – and significant reputational damage to both author and publisher. The critical discussion that ensued divided readers, with critics drawing attention to the ableist, classist, racist, and sexist undertones of the work, while Clanchy's most vocal supporters argued that her critics were "abusive trolls" (Rajesh, 2021, para. 4) who condemned the book without reading it. Thus, this paper scrutinises the public commentary that surrounded the controversy to demonstrate that there was, indeed, "some harm, some foul". The paper then assesses the value of harm-preventative measures available to practising Australian editors who work with problematic content in creative nonfiction texts. The paper concludes by offering an evidence-based probability of harm model for editing problematic content, with the overarching goal of minimising potential harm, and promoting safe and responsible editing practice.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:
Creative nonfiction, editing, duty of care, harm, distressing material, trauma, trigger warnings

Content note

This paper contains discussions of potentially distressing subjects, such as trauma, racism, and death, as well as verbatim excerpts from the original version of Kate Clanchy's memoir, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (2019), a text that has been widely criticised for its harmful representations of minority groups. As the purpose of this paper is to isolate problematic ideas and language in order to develop a best-practice framework for mitigating the potential harm of creative nonfiction that contains problematic or distressing content, the authors have chosen not to censor any terms.

Introduction

Beatrice Davis, Australia's most celebrated editor, once described editing as "invisible mending" (Grundy, 2022, para. 15). The invisible mender – the editor – works "almost always unseen and unheard – until something goes wrong" (Grundy, 2022, para. 1). However, in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the publication of Kate Clanchy's memoir, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (2019) [1], and the subsequent harm generated by both the book itself as well as the ensuing public discussion, the role of the editor was notably absent from the conversation. Indeed, the responsibility of the editor, and their duty of care to both the author and the reader, is rarely discussed beyond the guiding aphorism that the editor "do no harm" (Fisher Saller, 2009, p. 24). Thus, the Clanchy fiasco poses the question, "what is the editor's duty of care when editing creative nonfiction texts that contain problematic or distressing material?" To interrogate the ethical dimension of this question, the authors used Clanchy's memoir as a case study, and explored in detail the controversy and harm caused by the memoir. In addition, a rigorous literature review was undertaken to define "creative nonfiction", and to explore why it might be necessary to exercise a duty of care when editing creative nonfiction texts. This review identified what harm-preventative tools, if any, are available to editors for the purpose of harm mitigation when working with creative nonfiction that contains potentially distressing material. Finally, a probability of harm model that draws on the existing literature was developed, with the objective of assisting contemporary editors to identify the potential harm of creative nonfiction and to provide recommendations to the author to mitigate this harm.

Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me, and what it taught us

Kate Clanchy is a British poet, freelance writer, and secondary school teacher whose controversial memoir, *Some Kids* (2019), was first published by Picador in 2019. The memoir details Clanchy's teaching career of nearly thirty years in various state schools in the United Kingdom, including stories of some of the children she taught, the teachers who she worked with, and the resulting lessons that she learned during her teaching career (Clanchy, 2019). In 2020, Clanchy's memoir, which was initially praised by reviewers, won the Orwell Prize for Political Writing, with judges venerating Clanchy as a "brilliantly honest writer" and applauding her memoir as "moving, funny, and full of love" (Hinsliff, 2022, para. 3).

However, in November of the following year, a teacher – who goes by the handle @Ceridwen on Goodreads – posted a review of the memoir, which accused Clanchy of using "racist

stereotypes" to describe her students (2020, para. 4). @Ceridwen also criticised Clanchy's memoir as "centred on [a] white middle-class woman's harmful, judgemental, and bigoted views on race, class, and body image" (2020, para. 3). Clanchy responded to these claims, initially on Goodreads and then on Twitter, in a series of now-deleted Tweets (Twomey, 2021, para. 1) [2]. In her response to @Ceridwen's criticism, Clanchy claimed that the Goodreads user had "made up a racist quote" that was not in the book (Hinsliff, 2022, para. 5). In an updated version of her review, @Ceridwen accused Clanchy of "orchestrat[ing] her followers on Twitter to comment on [the review], report it, and contact Goodreads," and disclosed that Clanchy had accused the Goodreads user of defamation and abuse (2021, para. 2). Remarkably, it was soon confirmed by readers, including Twitter user, @CalamityWithaK, that the passages flagged by @Ceridwen were, in fact, included in Clanchy's memoir. In August 2021, two years after the memoir was published, Clanchy announced that she would rewrite her memoir, with Clanchy tweeting that she "welcome[d] the chance to write better" (@KateClanchy1, 2021). This online exchange between the author and her readers instigated the controversy that now surrounds Clanchy's memoir, which was republished by Swift Press in 2022 with the most criticised phrases redacted (Clanchy, 2022b).

Indeed, in the months that followed Clanchy's announcement, the international writing and publishing community acknowledged the psychological and psychosocial harm that could be caused by the publication of creative nonfiction and subsequently reopened discussion around the contested role of sensitivity readers in the publishing process. To be sure, the harm caused by *Some Kids* was far reaching, with the author, her readers, and Picador itself all implicated in, and impacted by, the memoir's publication [3]. In August 2021, when Clanchy declared that she would rewrite her memoir and remove the criticised passages, Picador promptly sent the revised version of the memoir to an unknown number of sensitivity readers for their feedback and review (Young, 2022, para. 2). Clanchy, however, publicly condemned the sensitivity readers' feedback, which she claimed was varied in content and quality. Clanchy reported, for example, that one sensitivity reader "fusspot[ed]" over the potential harm of single words, while another had "grander ambitions: [recommending that] paragraphs, sub-sections, and even entire chapters should be revised" (2022a, para. 3). Clanchy complained that the sensitivity readers "contradict[ed] each other freely, even praising and disparaging the same passages" (2022a, para. 3). Finally, Clanchy claimed that her sensitivity readers attributed the controversy of *Some Kids* not to "any actual words on the page" but to the author herself, protesting that "[the sensitivity readers] could tell that [Clanchy] personally had not done the 'self-reflection and self-education' that [was] necessary to understand the underlying reason that so many people felt harmed by [the] work" (2022a, para. 25). As such, Clanchy's sensitivity readers recommended that her memoir should not be republished, even though Clanchy removed the most heavily criticised words and phrases. Remarkably, this was a recommendation that Clanchy chose to ignore (Clanchy, 2022a). Instead of implementing the sensitivity readers' recommendations, Clanchy went on to spruik the Kindle edition of her memoir, claiming that this version of her text, which was now on sale with Swift, was "the same one [she] originally sent to the sensitivity readers for report" (2022a, para. 25). "If you want to know more about what caused such deep offence," Clanchy provoked, "I suggest you read [the book]" (2022a, para. 25).

Some harm, some foul

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that the harm caused to Clanchy's readers by the racial prejudice underlining the author's memoir extended beyond harmful stereotypes perpetuated by the text to racially charged ramifications in the real world. Most notably, for three of Clanchy's readers and subsequent critics – Monisha Rajesh, a travel writer; along with Professor Sunny Singh, author and editor of *The Good Immigrant USA*; and writer, Chimene Suleyman – the harm the memoir caused was all too real. The trio were accused of leading a "Twitter charge" against Clanchy and consequently endured "months of racist abuse and sometimes violent threats" (Hinsliff, 2022, para. 6). Rajesh, in a recount of her experience reading *Some Kids*, deemed it "incredulous that anti-Semitic and anti-Black tropes could have made it into a book published as recently as 2019" (2021, para. 2). In her essay, Rajesh likens several passages of the text to the racism that she experienced as a student who was subjected to racist taunts because her appearance was different to her peers. Rajesh recounts, for instance, how one of her teachers "paraded [her] in front of 26 nine-year-old boys who didn't believe girls could have black hair [and] allow[ed] them to touch it" (2021, para. 4). The parallels between Rajesh's own experiences of racism, and those of the children described in Clanchy's text, not only moved her to anger but caused her to feel a protective instinct towards the children described in *Some Kids* (Rajesh, 2021). Rajesh tells how the text left her "bristling at the idea that any teacher might look at [her] own mixed-race daughters with such scrutiny" (2021, para. 4).

Thus, in August 2021, Rajesh entered the unfolding Twitter conversation with Singh and Suleyman, and together, the three shared how those readers who had drawn attention to Clanchy's use of racist language were "condemned as abusive trolls" (Rajesh, 2021, para. 4). Rajesh, Singh, and Suleyman were also "targeted, harassed, and gaslighted online" by Clanchy's supporters (Akhtar, 2021). In an open letter penned by writer and editor Sabeena Ahktar, and subsequently signed by over 1000 authors, poets, journalists, editors, and publishers, Ahktar (2021) called for an end to the online abuse, noting that "it should not need pointing out that such claims have far reaching consequences on the lives, safety, and livelihood of people of colour".

At the same time as Rajesh, Singh, and Suleyman were harassed online, Clanchy also reported that she had experienced significant harm upon the publication of her memoir. At the height of the online backlash, Clanchy, who was grieving the loss of her parents and navigating a difficult divorce, disclosed that she had, "at times, felt suicidal" (Clanchy, cited in Hinsliff, 2022, para. 6). Clanchy claimed that her publisher, Picador, had "failed in its duty of care" to her, and that she had experienced suicidal ideation, with the desire to take her own life "very strong" (Clanchy, cited in Matthews, 2022, paras. 4–8). Without doubt, the controversy significantly damaged Clanchy's writing career, with Picador returning the book rights to Clanchy (Flood, 2022, para. 3) and removing the author from their portfolio after a twenty-year collaboration (Matthews, 2022, para. 7). In addition, Picador – an imprint of Pan Macmillan – announced that it would stop distributing all eight of Clanchy's books (Matthews, 2022, para. 11) before

withdrawing their support of Clanchy's forthcoming project, an anthology of poems by Clanchy's students (Knight, 2022).

Compounding the damage to Clanchy's reputation, the organisers of the Orwell Prize issued a statement about Clanchy's award, separating its judges from both the content and criticism of the memoir (The Orwell Foundation, 2021). Philip Pullman, one of Clanchy's most vocal supporters, was also pressed by the British Society of Authors Council to issue an apology to writers and readers of colour for "reacting in haste" and "causing harm" (@PhilipPullman, 2021). Pullman subsequently resigned from his role as president of the Society, explaining in his resignation letter that he would "not be free to express [his] personal opinions as long as [he] remained President" (Pullman, as cited in Society of Authors, 2022, para. 6). Following Pullman's resignation, Poetry Wales released a now retracted apology for platforming the memoir, acknowledging that it was not the "intention of Poetry Wales to platform racist and ableist views" (Twomey, 2021, para. 12). Poetry Wales also expressed their dismay at what they termed Clanchy and Picador's "denials of responsibility" (Poetry Wales, as cited in Twomey, 2021, para. 12). To be sure, the harm that Clanchy experienced was substantial, with very few of the author's peers emerging unscathed.

Not surprisingly, the reputational damage caused by *Some Kids* also impacted Clanchy's publisher, Picador. In August 2021, before severing ties with Clanchy in January 2022 (Shaffi, 2022), Picador released a statement advising readers that Clanchy's memoir would be updated for future editions and that, following the fallout, Picador would "continue to listen and learn" (Picador Books, as cited in Chandler, 2021, para. 4). Three days later, the publishing house was forced to issue a second statement in response to the heavy criticism levelled at the first, which was deemed "insufficiently strong enough" (Slater, 2021, para. 4). In the second apology, Picador confessed that their initial response was "too slow" and stated that they "vigorously condemn[ed] the despicable online bullying of many of those who have spoken out [against Clanchy's work]" (@PicadorBooks, 2021). Carmen Callil, the founder of the feminist publishing house, Virago, criticised Picador for their response, claiming that the publishing house "badly failed" Clanchy and that "the first [duty] of a publisher is to their author" (Calill, as cited in Hinsliff, 2022, para. 30). In February 2022, Mark Richards, co-founder of Swift Press, purchased the rights to Clanchy's memoir (Comerford, 2022) and again criticised Picador, noting that "publishing has a duty of care to stand by its authors, and in [this] particular case, this hasn't happened" (Richards, as cited in Hinsliff, 2022, para. 29). Five months later, in July 2022, Picador announced that its publishing director, Philip Gwyn Jones, would be "stepping down by 'mutual agreement' after two years in the role" (Clark, 2022, para. 1). Gwyn Jones, who had been heavily criticised for his handling of the Clanchy controversy, initially defended Clanchy but, when criticised, distanced himself from the author by posting on Twitter: "I must use my privileged position as a white middle-class gatekeeper … to promote diversity, equity, and inclusivity" (@PGJPublishing, 2021). Unlike Mark Richards at Swift Press, Gwyn Jones did not directly address his duty of care to Clanchy, nor did he outwardly defend his client, an action that he later told *The Daily Telegraph* he regretted (Gwyn Jones, as cited in Hinsliff, 2022, para. 22).

While it seems, then, that no one escaped the collateral damage of Clanchy's memoir, there is, in fact, one cohort who reported that they experienced no harm – Clanchy's students. In 2021, Clanchy's students penned an open letter to *The Bookseller*, advising that they did not feel harmed by their representation in Clanchy's memoir, instead arguing that the criticism levelled at the work, including the suggested interventions, were "disempowering and causing [them] distress, because [the criticism] does not reflect [their] reality" (Bayley, 2021, para. 6). In an article submitted to *The Sunday Times*, Shukria Rezaei – believed to be the character Shakila in Clanchy's memoir – rejected the criticism of Clanchy's description of her eyes as "almond-shaped", stating that the criticism, not the phrase itself, upset her. Rezaei reasoned that "I am that girl with the almond eyes [and] I did not find [the description] offensive" (2021, para. 2). Rezaei goes on to say that her almond-shaped eyes are "the core of [her] Hazara identity" (2021, para. 3), implying that erasure of the physical description is akin to erasure of her identity. Indeed, the overwhelming sentiment that underpinned the students' support of Clanchy's memoir was the idea that the memoir is "truthful", a concept that calls into question the creative nonfiction genre itself and its slippery relationship with truth.

Creative nonfiction and truth-telling

Creative nonfiction is a broad and non-definitive term that, as Lee Gutkind asserts, functions as an "umbrella term" for "memoir, personal essay, biography, narrative history, and long form narrative" (2024, para. 2). For Gutkind, these subgenres are "different in voice, orientation, and purpose" (2024, para. 3). However, what ultimately characterises creative nonfiction as a genre, and what distinguishes creative nonfiction from fiction, is the element of truth-telling. Interestingly, the addition of the word "creative" to "creative nonfiction" is, as Gutkind notes, "a controversial [decision]", but one that ultimately affords writers the dual privileges of "flexibility and freedom" (2024, para. 8). Gutkind, who is venerated by *Vanity Fair* as the "godfather" of creative nonfiction (Wolcott, 1997, p. 6), argues that, in the genre of creative nonfiction, "there are very few rules for writers", cautioning that "as long as you don't violate the readers' trust and, in the process, your own credibility", the genre offers writers "freedom and flexibility – and daring" (2024, para. 5). Importantly, Gutkind maintains that writing creative nonfiction is "governed by responsibility, not just to the people about whom we write, but [to] those who read and publish our work" (2024, para. 5).

Prior to Gutkind coining the term creative nonfiction in 1997, French academic Phillipe Lejeune developed the autobiographical pact to differentiate autobiography from the novel. The autobiographical pact, Lejeune claimed, is an agreement between the author and the reader, in which the author – clearly defined as the writer, the narrator, *and* the protagonist – agrees to write, in a serious manner, about their own life, so that the reader may trust they are reading a "true" and therefore autobiographical account (Lejeune, 1989). Beyond Lejeune's work, and building on the genre foundations established by Gutkind, the concept of truth-telling in creative nonfiction calls into question the editor's duty of care when editing creative nonfiction texts that contain potentially harmful or distressing material. Thus, the Clanchy controversy requires deeper consideration of what constitutes "harm" and "potential harm" in the editing and publishing context.

Wrongful setbacks and consensual harm

The harm principle, which was first proposed in 1859 by English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, is a central tenant of liberalism (The Ethics Centre, 2016). As a theory, the harm principle treats the notion of harm as ideas or language that lead to the wrongful treatment or perception of certain groups (The Ethics Centre, 2016). This harm may, in turn, impose what Mill calls "wrongful setbacks" to the group's interests, including their rights. Importantly, in the harm principle, Mill (1859) distinguishes between a harm and an offence, explaining that an offence may refer to an idea that hurts one's feelings but which does not necessarily lead to wrongful treatment of an individual. Mill also attempts to define when interference should and should not take place in order to prevent harm from occurring. Specifically, Mill argues that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient" (1859, p. 223).

It is important to note that Mill's definition of harm – and his related theorising of when interference is, or is not, appropriate – has been subject to much criticism since its theoretical conception. Ben Saunders, in his analysis of the harm principle, argues that Mill could have avoided defending his principle by simply concluding that "the only legitimate reason for interference is to prevent non-consensual harm" (2016, p. 1006). Mill himself, in his essay, 'On Liberty', notes that consent should be "free, voluntary, and undeceived" (1859, p. 225). Saunders, in an attempt to further explain the notion of consensual harm, offers the example of a sports injury, specifically an individual who breaks their nose during a boxing match. While the broken nose constitutes harm, the boxer enters the match with the understanding that doing so involves a certain degree of risk, including the risk of injury to oneself. Thus, the individual enters the match with informed consent to potential harm. The resulting injury, therefore, does not necessitate legal or social intervention by authorities such as the police, because the injury is a consensual harm (Saunders, 2016, p. 1011).

In the context of editing creative nonfiction, consensual harm could be assumed of the reader, contingent on provisions that ensure that the reader is fully informed of the potential for harm. Therefore, to ensure consistent use of the term 'harm', this paper employs the definition of harm outlined in Mill's (1859) concept of the harm principle and later extrapolated in the work of Saunders (2016). That is, the concept of potential harm refers to the possibility of causing wrongful setbacks to certain groups through the use of problematic language or the promotion of problematic ideas. Creative nonfiction texts, then, may be considered harmful if they contain ideas or language that may lead to the wrongful treatment or perception of others, regardless of the author's intent.

Editor duty of care: An intervention in harm potential

To date, the concept of duty of care remains relatively unexplored in editing and publishing scholarship. However, in educational pedagogy, the concept of informed consent and the related censorship of learning materials bear similarity to the concept of editorial care, as both educators and editors work with nonfiction texts that are consumed by readers whose

interpretations are influenced by their personal values, ideas, and prejudices. In this respect, duty of care is defined as the moral or legal obligation to not cause foreseeable harm to others (Plunkett, 2019). In light of Mill's and Saunders' definition of harm, editor duty of care can be defined as an intervention in harm potential through the recommendation of appropriate safeguarding measures to ensure that any harm endured is consensual.

Harmful or harmless?: Perceptions shaping interpretations

As aforementioned, there is a dearth of literature on editorial duty of care, especially in the creative nonfiction setting. As such, a literature review was undertaken to ascertain what editing tools for harm mitigation currently exist in editing praxis, and whether the use of these tools fall within the remit of the editor's duty of care when editing creative nonfiction texts that contain problematic or distressing material. As little to no research exists in this field, this paper borrows from educational pedagogy, and sociological and psychological contemporary practices, to interrogate the purpose, scope, and efficacy of these tools and to transfer their application to the editing context. The collected data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with the analysis informed by a relativist–constructivist theoretical framework.

In his seminal work, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*, Piaget (1952) determined that humans – and in particular, children – create meaning on the basis of their interactions and their ideas. The central idea of constructivism is that learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of their existing knowledge, which promotes deeper learning (Mcleod, 2023). Where Piaget's constructivism proposes that knowledge acquisition is scaffolded, and understanding is informed by the individual's previous experiences, Popper's Three Worlds paradigm [4] sees learning as an integration of the external world, which elicits an experience, and the internal world, which governs the individual's perception of that experience. The culmination of both experience and perception results in the third world, which consists of "products of the human mind" such as "languages; tales and stories and religious myths; scientific conjectures or theories, and mathematical constructions; songs and symphonies; paintings and sculptures" (Popper, 1978, p. 144). The Three Worlds paradigm interweaves the aforementioned definitions of harm proposed by Mill and Saunders with the creative nonfiction genre by proposing that memoir (World Three) is written from the perspective of personal experience and reflection (World Two). These experiences and reflections are a personal interpretation of the external world as it exists. Acts of harm and consensual harm occur not in the external world (World One), but instead in the interpretation of the external world (World Two) in order to shape meaningful and useful creations, such as memoir (World Three). Therefore, this interpretation of Popper's work suggests that harm intervention in the editing context is permissible if the intervention seeks to reshape the *interpretation* of the external world, rather than attempting to reshape the external world itself.

Sensitive or censorship?: The role of sensitivity readers

The role and function of sensitivity readers is a contentious issue that has been discussed from as early as 2017, when two sensitivity readers were hired by American author, Keira Drake, to review her debut novel "for harmful stereotypes" and to suggest appropriate changes (Alter,

2017, para. 3) [5]. A sensitivity read, then, is defined as "a review of a book, script or game before it is published to help avoid portraying marginalised people and cultures inaccurately, including unintentionally using stereotypes or causing upset" (Young, 2022, para. 6). Sensitivity readers, by extension, are considered to be specialised editors who "conduct a very specific read of the manuscript, and offer notes on characters from marginalised groups, or elements, which may cause offence" (Dawson, 2022, para. 2).

In Clanchy's case, and in the case of most writers who employ sensitivity readers, there are mixed responses to the employment of sensitivity reads for editing purposes. Some critics, such as Alexandra Alter, argue that sensitivity readers are censorious and thus play a problematic role in the publishing process because they provide "a quality-control backstop" (2017, para. 5) that results in the publication of "sanitised books that tiptoe around difficult topics" (2021, paras. 4–7). This sentiment is echoed by Pamela Paul, who, in her opinion piece, 'There's More Than One Way to Ban a Book' (2022), concedes that "the publishing industry would never condone book banning", before continuing that "a subtler form of repression is taking place in the literary world … defending these restrictions with thoughtful-sounding rationales" (2022, para. 4).

On the other hand, those who advocate for sensitivity reading argue that sensitivity readers are not "preventing authors from tackling tough subjects or writing cross-culturally" but rather "helping to guard against misrepresentation" (Alter, 2017, para. 9). Former librarian and writer, Dhonielle Clayton – a sensitivity reader herself – argues that such misrepresentation is a "craft failure" (2018, para. 3). For Clayton, "misusing the term censorship and warping its definition to smear sensitivity readers is an attempt to divert attention from the real issue: the systematic erasure and blockage of marginalised voices" (2018, para. 8). In response to the criticisms levelled at sensitivity reads, E.E. Lawrence acknowledges that sensitivity readers "modify works of fiction as to make them more politically palatable", making the practice "tantamount to censorship" (Lawrence, 2020, p. 31). However, Lawrence examines the potential censorship of sensitivity reads from the perspective of librarians, who are "bound by the moral principles [of the American Library Association (ALA)] to oppose censorship in its various instantiations" (2020, pp. 31–32). In his examination of the *ALA Standards and Guidelines*, Lawrence explains that these guidelines stipulate that censorship can be justified if its objective is the "prevention of harm to individuals and the public good" (2020, p. 32). Lawrence thus concludes that, when viewed from the perspective of the librarian's duty of care, sensitivity reads constitute a form of "morally permissible censorship" (2020, p. 33) [6]. This idea that sensitivity reading is a form of permissible censorship reflects the theoretical justification of Mill's harm principle, whereby the only occasion in which interference to one's actions is sanctioned is when such intervention intends to prevent harm to others. As Mill reminds us, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (1859, p. 223).

A warning on the inefficacy of trigger warnings

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the digital response to safeguarding these stimuli – referred to as the trigger warning – appeared for the first time online in feminist discussion boards that typically involved conversations about sexual assault [7]. At the same time, the term "trigger warning" also started to appear on the social networking service, LiveJournal, where it was employed in works of fan fiction to warn readers about the inclusion of explicit content. With the emergence of both Twitter in 2006 and Tumblr in 2007, and with the rise in popularity of Facebook in 2008, the use of trigger warnings was soon widely adopted on social media (Vingiano, 2014). In 2015, the trigger warning debate subsequently entered academia, culminating in an "eruption [of] blog posts, higher education think-pieces, and intense Facebook arguments about [the use of] 'trigger warnings' in the classroom" (Lothian, 2016).

Today, a trigger warning is commonly defined as "a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc., [that alerts] the reader or viewer to the fact that [the work] contains potentially distressing material", with the warning "often used to introduce a description of such content" (Bridgland et al., 2019, p. 602). At the time of writing, there is no established scholarship about the affordances and limitations of trigger warnings in the context of nonfiction publishing. However, given the recent research and debate around the use of trigger warnings in the university setting, there are important synergies between the trigger warnings debate in academia and the value of trigger warnings for creative nonfiction readers, editors, and publishers.

Trigger warnings have received mixed reviews in educational pedagogy, with critics arguing that trigger warnings do not serve their intended purpose (that is, to reduce potential harm) but, instead, quash critical engagement with a text and reduce the reader's ability to develop skills in critical thinking and reading resilience (Jackson, 2021). Some critics of trigger warnings, like sceptics of sensitivity reads, also voice concerns that the trigger warning is a "form of censorship and political correctness" (Laguardia et al., 2017, p. 885). Indeed, a 2014 report released by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) criticised the widespread implementation of trigger warnings in higher education, condemning their use as "anti-intellectual" (para. 3) and as "a threat to academic freedom" (para. 1). Specifically, the AAUP asserted that trigger warnings are prejudicial labels that are designed to restrict reader or audience access to a text based on the author's judgement – an action that the AAUP deems equivalent to an act of censorship (2014, para. 4).

Beyond the argument of censorship, the use of trigger warnings has also been criticised for not achieving the intended purpose of protecting university students. Melanie Takarangi notes that trigger warnings do not, in fact, influence how readers respond to potentially harmful course material but instead give rise to "anticipatory anxiety" (Takarangi, as cited in Gildersleeve et al., 2022, para. 8). This finding is supported by the recent work of both Bryce et al. (2023) and Laguardia et al. (2017), with the latter cautioning that trigger warnings "cannot function as a vaccine to triggers [of trauma]" and that trigger warnings are "not a solution, but an aid" (p. 891). Myron Jackson (2021), too, argues against the use of trigger warnings in education,

maintaining that educators should embrace "learning through openness rather than closedness" (2021, p. 249), since closed-mindedness does not allow for the critical thinking and curiosity required for self-growth.

Despite these arguments against the use of trigger warnings, advocates for the use of the trigger warning do not perceive the practice as prejudicial. Rather, trigger warnings are viewed as tools of empowerment that "encourage students to take responsibility for, and control of, their wellbeing" (Laguardia et al., 2017, p. 890). Indeed, while the debate on the use of trigger warnings in academia is largely centred around concepts of censorship and the appearance of political correctness, trigger warnings have found much success in the online fan fiction community, where they are viewed as tools of empowerment and accessibility. For example, Lothian observes that, when trigger warnings first appeared on the fan fiction website, Archive of Our Own (AO3), these warnings were deemed content warnings rather than trigger warnings by users, although it was clear that "the warnings [operated] on the terrain of trauma and abuse" (2016, p. 747). Regardless, by incorporating these warnings into the site's architecture, AO3 allowed readers to exclude certain stories in their search, while at the same time equally enabling warnings to operate as a form of enticement (Lothian, 2016). As Lothian explains, "One may search by field in order to read about violence, death, and rape as easily as to exclude them from one's fannish experience" (2016, p. 748).

Thus, while it could be argued that trigger warnings prompt the same sense of intrigue in the classroom, Lothian notes that the most significant difference between fan-based and pedagogical approaches to trigger warnings is that "fandom is for fun", whereas "classrooms are spaces in which we are not primarily concerned with producing pleasure" (2016, p. 748). Like Lothian, Klapper (2023) and Gildersleeve et al. (2021) also argue that educators should not confuse classroom safety with the experience of learner discomfort. In acknowledging, however, that there are valuable aspects of trigger warning use in online communities that can be transferred to the classroom, Lothian subsequently opted to accompany distressing material with content warnings in her own classroom practice. Laguardia et al. support the idea that the inclusion of the word 'warning' in 'trigger warning' is problematic and suggest instead that trigger warnings be reframed as "content notifications" (2017, p. 889). Unlike trigger warnings, content notifications do "not imply any right to avoid content" but instead offer the reader the opportunity to provide "informed consent" (Laguardia et al., 2017, p. 889). Certainly, the concept of the content notification, or the content note, supports Jackson's assertion that learning should occur through "openness rather than closedness" (2021, p. 249). Therefore, it can be inferred that reframing trigger warnings as content notes in educational pedagogy and, subsequently, in editing practice, might redirect discussions from censorship and political correctness to reader empowerment, consensual learning and, ultimately, ideological transformation.

Conscious language

As defined by Karen Yin, "Conscious language liberates instead of limits. It emphasizes the importance of context and critical thinking, and it flexes and grows alongside society" (2024,

p. 11). Similarly, the *Conscious Language Toolkit for Editors* (2021) – created by freelance editor Crystal Shelley – endorses language that is grounded in inclusivity and respect. According to Shelley, "writing that is unintentionally biased, excluding or disrespectful can be harmful, and [thus] part of an editor's role is to bring these types of language issues to a writer's attention" (2021, p. 4). Thus, Yin's style guide and Shelley's toolkit serve as practical guides for editors to encourage writers to use conscious language in their work. Writing with conscious language, according to Shelley, "requires us to think critically about how to frame our message … even if language is not excluding or hurtful to [oneself]" (2021, p. 6). While Shelley's toolkit has been developed for editors, the guide's key concepts are also endorsed in the health care industry and, in particular, in the use of art therapy.

Alex Kapitan [9] and Lynn Kapitan explore the use of conscious language in art therapy, acknowledging that "words serve a key role in maintaining cultural norms and values, including those that dictate which experiences and identities are considered valuable, 'normal', and powerful, and which are considered abnormal, pathological, and even nonhuman" (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 65). In both the editing profession and in art therapy, Kapitan and Kapitan observe that there is a misguided belief in a false dichotomy between 'correct' and 'incorrect' language, with correct language being "neutral, objective, proper, [and] good", and incorrect language being "biased, improper, [and] impolite" (2023, p. 66). This myth – that correct language is "good" and that incorrect language is "bad" – is otherwise known as prescriptivism. Linguistic prescriptivism endorses adherence to the 'rules' of the English language, such as grammar, spelling, and style; however, Kapitan and Kapitan argue that the purpose of linguistic prescriptivism is not to "maintain standards" for use of the English language but rather to "serve a prevailing power structure" (2023, p. 66). Kapitan and Kapitan also observe that conversations about conscious – or inclusive, sensitive, or bias-free – language are often reduced to claims of censorship and the restriction of free speech. Meanwhile, some prescriptivists believe that using the "correct" language means that no harm can come from the chosen words (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 66). For Kapitan and Kapitan, neither prescriptivism nor bias-free language is useful because both approaches focus on the correctness of language rather than user care.

Like Yin (2024) and Shelley (2021), then, Kapitan and Kapitan (2023) emphasise the importance of context in the use and application of conscious language. Kapitan and Kapitan explain that, while actively biased and hateful language is understood as harmful, there is a "general perception … that all other language is neutral" (2023, p. 67). In their work on a liberatory mental model for contemporary art therapy practice, Kapitan and Kapitan present a spectrum of language that ranges from "violent" to "liberatory" (2023, p. 67). Violent language is the most easily recognisable as harmful; it actively communicates "hate, disgust, and intolerance", with a clear causation to harm (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 67). "Coded language", on the other hand, "covertly communicates prejudice, disdain, or judgment", while "unquestioned language" is unconscious everyday language that is "rife with subtle cues that weave stereotypes, expectations, and values" (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 67). Generalised statements that do not allow for diversity, such as "all lives matter", are an example of "minimising language", which is "often used by people who sincerely believe in the worth and

dignity of all but do not question the values and norms that uphold oppression" (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 67). Meanwhile, Kapitan and Kapitan emphasise that "liberatory language actively affirms all life and the full diversity of human experience; works to communicate love, compassion, and nonviolence; and imbues those who encounter it with personal and collective agency" (2023, p. 67). According to Kapitan and Kapitan, the type of language that frequently causes harm is not "actively violent language, but rather … the accumulation of unquestioned language" (2023, p. 69). With this in mind, Kapitan and Kapitan's advice to art therapists can also be transferred to editors: "locate yourself with respect to your social location in your relationships, your writing, and your work, and … understand your lens or frame" (2023, p. 71).

The probability of harm model

There are a number of harm-mitigation tools in educational pedagogy, and in sociological and psychological contemporary practices, that can be adapted to the editing of creative nonfiction. Importantly, the role of the sensitivity reader, though contentious, is an integral function in mitigating the harm of creative nonfiction texts, as is the use of content notes and conscious language. Content notes, as established, allow readers to participate in consensual harm aligned to Mill's assertion that consent be "free, voluntary, and undeceived" (1859, p. 225) and enable open engagement with potentially harmful materials, simultaneously ensuring that, while "we cannot create a world without structural violence, we can reshape the world we have such that it does not constantly reproduce these things" (Lothian, 2016, p. 751). Similarly, conscious language allows for world reshaping in an ethically responsible manner and should, therefore, be adopted by authors of creative nonfiction.

Thus, a best-practice model for mitigating the potential harm of creative nonfiction texts that contain problematic or distressing content should incorporate the use of content notes and conscious language (Figure 1). This model (North, 2024) is structured as a traffic-light system in which scaled levels of harm probability (visually represented by the colours green, yellow, orange, and red) represent risk likelihood (green=low risk; yellow=moderate risk; orange=moderate to high risk; and red=high risk). This probability model, and its accompanying recommendations for harm mitigation, can be adapted to a wide range of creative nonfiction texts, including autobiography, memoir, and personal essays; however, further research is required to test the model with authors and readers of diverse cultural, educational, and social backgrounds.

Probability of harm	Contributors to harm probability	Recommendations for harm mitigation
Low	Liberatory language has been used in the text. The author has included an explicit acknowledgement of privilege. An adequate content note allows for the reader's informed consent.	It is recommended that the author employs a sensitivity reader to ensure that the author's implicit bias has not unintentionally impacted the text.

Moderate	Minimising language has been used in the text. There is some acknowledgement of the author's privilege; however, it is not explicit. There is some indication of the content of the creative nonfiction text (for example, single word trigger warnings).	It is recommended that the creative nonfiction text is rewritten in liberatory language. It is recommended that the author include an introductory statement that acknowledges their privilege. It is also recommended that this statement includes a content note that advises of the context of the problematic or distressing material to allow the reader to make an informed decision about their reading engagement. It is recommended that the author employs a sensitivity reader to ensure that their implicit bias has not unintentionally impacted the text and to identify potentially harmful views and language.
Moderate-High	Minimising and/or unquestioned language has been used in the text, and there is no acknowledgement of the author's privilege. There is no indication of problematic or distressing material.	
High	Violent language has been used in the text, and there is no acknowledgement of the author's privilege. There is no indication of problematic or distressing content. Language perpetuates harmful stereotypes.	

Figure 1: North's Probability of Harm Model for Creative Nonfiction

Conclusion

In conclusion, a close examination of the harm resulting from Kate Clanchy's memoir, *Some Kids* (2019; 2022b), and a survey of the various harm-preventative tools and measures implemented in select pedagogical, sociological, and psychological practices, has determined that the editor does indeed have a duty of care when editing creative nonfiction that contains potentially harmful material. This paper offers a probability of harm model to guide editors in exercising their duty of care when editing such work. However, the authors acknowledge that this model is one tool for the mitigation of harm rather than an all-encompassing solution, especially since publishing research currently lacks the diversity required to create a robust and ethically responsible best-practice framework for nonfiction editing. Therefore, this paper should be used as a catalyst for future research in this space, and – in particular – for work that helps nurture and shape creative nonfiction texts that *do no harm*.

Notes

[1] For brevity, Clanchy's memoir is hereafter referred to as *Some Kids*.

[2] The critical debate and online discussion surrounding Clanchy's memoir, *Some Kids* (2019; 2022b), comprises a significant portion of the research undertaken for this paper. However, due to the transient nature of social media, both Facebook and Twitter/X posts that were once available have since been removed and now exist only as screenshots or as verbatim quotes in web articles. This material has been referenced as closely as possible to the original source.

[3] In 2022, a veteran writing agent, who asked to remain anonymous, spoke to *The Guardian* about the Clanchy controversy, referring to the publishing debacle as a "group fail" in which "the publisher failed in their duty of care to the writer" and "the author failed in her duty of care to her pupils" (Hinsliff, 2022, para. 10). The agent added, "Nobody emerges from the story well … Harm has been done, and now everyone's afraid" (Hinsliff, 2022, para. 10).

[4] Karl Popper (1978) expands upon Piaget's claim that learners will scaffold new learning based on their personal experiences through the construction of his Three Worlds paradigm (Popper, 1978). Popper (1978) conceived three worlds, in which World One is the external world as it exists in nature, and World Two is one's personal interpretation of World One. This interpretation is unique to the individual because it is subjective, filtered through experience, and "comprised of internal mental states and feelings, volitions and whims, and ideas and interpretations" (Popper, as cited in Harlow et al., 2007, p. 43). World Three, by extension, comprises the various creations of the human mind, all of which interact with World One and World Two, since, as Popper explains, "human interpretations" (World Two) are necessary to shape natural materials (World One) into useful and meaningful forms (World Three) (Popper, as cited in Harlow et al., 2007, p. 43).

[5] Like Clanchy's memoir, Drake's novel was initially met with praise. As a work of fantasy, *The Continent* (2018) explores the construct of privilege through the centring of a fictional place known as the Continent, a "brutal realm where privileged tourists, safe in their heli-planes, gaze down with detached curiosity at the native people slaughtering each other below" (Shapiro, 2018, para. 1). Seven months after the release of the advanced reader copy, however, African American young-adult fiction author, Justina Ireland, posted on Twitter a point-by-point summary of the novel, which she dismissed as "racist garbage fire" (@JustinaIreland, 2016). In response, Drake contacted Harlequin Teen and requested an extension to her publication date, so that she could revise the text. Harlequin Teen agreed, marking the first time in history that the publisher had delayed a paperback's release for author revisions (Mason, 2018, para. 5).

[6] Interestingly, the prevention of harm to both individuals and the public good is echoed in Clayton's earlier claim that misrepresentation is a craft issue. As Clayton suggests, "The industry must recognise that real censorship shows up each season in the way new books [that contain harmful stereotypes] are bought by editors and find their way into bookstores" (2018, para. 10).

[7] According to Andi Zeisler, the co-founder of *Bitch* magazine, trigger warnings were first employed in the discussion boards of the feminist magazine, *Ms.*, in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Zeisler, as cited in Vingiano, 2014).

[8] To make his point, Klapper (2023) recounts his visit to Yad Vashem, one of the world's most important Holocaust museums. Klapper recalls how the photos in the Israeli museum "deeply disturbed [him]" and that he subsequently "found it difficult to think about anything else for the next couple of days" (2023, para. 7). At the same time, however, Klapper acknowledges that he ultimately found the experience to be "transformational": "the images at Yad Vashem, unlike statistics and idioms, [were] deeply affecting" (2023, para. 7). Klapper concludes that "to understand certain parts of history," one must be "disturbed" (2023, para. 7).

[9] Alex Kapitan describes himself as a "self-styled radical copyeditor" who supports writers, editors, and organisations to use language "consciously and anti-oppressively" (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 66). Kapitan's work explores the importance of conscious language and the influence and impact that language exerts on the shaping of social and cultural norms.

[10] This letter initiated by Akhtar (2021) was viewed by the authors on the internet on 20 October 2023. Since that time, the *Bad Form Review website* has been removed.

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