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# The Professional Writer's Many Personae: Creative Nonfiction, Popular Writing, Speechwriting, and Personal Narrative

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The Professional Writer's Many Personae: Creative Nonfiction, Popular Writing,  
Speechwriting, and Personal Narrative

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An Honors Program Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts & Letters  
James Madison University

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by Rosemary Kaye Girard

May 2015

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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The Professional Writer's Many Personae: Creative Nonfiction, Popular Writing,  
Speechwriting, and Personal Narrative

James Madison University

Rosemary K. Girard

**The Professional Writer's Many Personae:**  
Creative Nonfiction, Popular Writing, Speechwriting, and  
Personal Narrative

*By Rosemary Girard*

*James Madison University, Class of 2015*

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*AUTHOR'S NOTE*  
**& INTRODUCTION**

A professional writer's career can take many forms and, because of this, their talents can span across a variety of settings and styles. Understanding the dynamics between genres of writing—their similarities, their differences, their intricacies—is therefore crucial to being a successful writer.

Genres help us to organize information and fulfill expectations. They are shorthand forms of communication that allow both readers and writers to land on the same page instantly, to locate a drawer in a file cabinet and be prepared for what's inside. Readers rely on genres to understand writers' intentions, and writers depend on them to connect with and confirm the expectations of their readers. Genres access schema and create familiarity with scripts we've seen or read.

In this book, I discuss in detail four genres of professional writing that are interwoven but also distinct: creative nonfiction, popular writing, speechwriting, and personal narrative. While many nuances exist in each genre, and I explain them in much greater depth later, you may assume the following simplistic definitions throughout:

**Creative nonfiction:** a genre of writing that is based on true events, written with creativity, attention to language, and a strong sense of narrative.

**Popular writing:** a form of the creative nonfiction genre that is designed for a general public audience about information related to popular culture; often a shorter, more timely, form of creative nonfiction published in newspapers and magazines.

**Speechwriting:** a form of writing loosely based on the creative nonfiction genre that is specifically prepared to be delivered orally.

**Personal narrative:** a form of the creative nonfiction genre that explains and uncovers aspects of the self, of individual identity, through storytelling.

As such, this book is organized in four chapters—one for each genre of professional writing. Within each chapter, I've broken down the content further, dividing them into three sections—research, rhetorical analysis, and creative work. The research sections of each chapter are meant to be didactic, giving you an understanding of what the genre is, what unique characteristics it has, and how a writer might go about writing a piece in that style. The rhetorical analysis sections will look critically at a published piece



of writing in that chapter's genre and dissect its effectiveness. And, finally, the creative work sections are pieces that I have written myself in that chapter's genre. I designed the book in this way to provide a chronology that advances from theory on writing, to the analysis of successful writers' work, to the creation of my own pieces. In other words, it presents an information flow that moves from research to analysis and, finally, to creation.

As with anything else, the benefits of defining genres also come with their costs—of blurred lines, of overlaps, and of exceptions. What follows is not absolute precision or truth, for such a thing in the creative act of writing is likely never to exist. Instead, it is an attempt to make some sense of four genres that professional writers encounter, to praise published pieces for their success, and to provide full examples of my own. Some of the best pieces of writing have come from broken rules and the rebellion of creativity. But it helps, often, to at least know where to begin.

*CHAPTER 1*

**CREATIVE NONFICTION**

## SECTION 1: Creative Nonfiction Research

If there were ever anyone who could explain the paradox that is creative nonfiction, it would be Douglas Hesse—accomplished author, essayist, professor, and scholar of creative nonfiction and writing pedagogy, in particular. The genre of creative nonfiction is often a blur of information that is acknowledged for what it is but not understood. It is one of those subjects that seems simple, yet is difficult to pinpoint, and the details are often so tangled that we confuse ourselves in trying to differentiate it from other styles of writing. Resembling wisps of air that are felt but are hard to get a firm grasp on, it is sensed but challenging to explain in sufficiently concrete terms. Hesse has described those terms with ease—so much so as to alleviate readers and writers, for through his words the nuances of what makes creative nonfiction a unique genre of its own are illuminated.

It probably shouldn't be, but creative nonfiction can perhaps be considered one of writing's greatest anomalies. It blends facts with creative liberties, is objective yet carries an author's individual voice and presence, and weaves an author's perception of reality into a "true" sense of reality. And do we even know what that is?

In his article "Imagining a Place for Creative Nonfiction," Douglas Hesse (2009) asks writers to visualize two worlds. One, which he calls *Terra Facta* or *Terra Argumenta*, is "the land of thesis and support, information and perspicuity, assertion and evidence" (p. 18). The other, *Terra Imagina*, is "the land of fiction, from the prairies of drama to the foothills of fiction to the peaks of poetry" (Hesse, 2009, p. 18). Given a piece of creative nonfiction writing and a map of this land, Hesse asks, what territory do students find themselves standing on?

It's not easy to say, for these students have found themselves in a fusion of seemingly contradictory worlds.

*Terra Facta*, I imagine, would house rectangular buildings, grow well-groomed grass. It would be placid, for everything would be in its proper place. Sterile, because any traces of contamination would impurify all empirical evidence gathered here. But, it would be structurally sound, stable. Strong, true, and decisive; definite.

*Terra Imagina*, on the other hand, would produce vibrant wildflowers and other feral, unkempt foliage blooming artistically. It would host elaborate and eccentric

architecture. There, weather experts would report spans of tumultuous storms on some days, periods of divine and blissful sunshine on others. It would be dramatic, yes, but also poetic and passionate.

It's hard to envision a crossroads for these two terrains, and I imagine the juncture would be just as muddled in real life as it is in many writers' imaginations. According to Hesse (2009), creative nonfiction is "'true,' grounded in reality but aesthetically rich, factual writing meant to be savored rather than simply exhumed or endured" (p. 18). Nonfiction is often a satiating glass of water, it fulfills its duty of nourishment, and with it alone we can easily survive. But creative nonfiction transforms this water into an aromatic glass of wine where it seems to live, breathe, and become part of a shared experience with readers.

The style involves a perplexing synthesis of genres that blurs the lines between creation and reality. Yet, the writer does not invent the information presented. Instead, creative nonfiction is aptly named for writing that describes straight facts with the artistry of creativity and imagination. It moves calmly and gradually, not out of a lack of dynamism, but because it simmers with details in a slow-cooker fashion, winning over readers with subtleties and giving them time to appreciate the poetry and interpret the meaning. There's something elegant, even regal, about well-written creative nonfiction that is prolonged with details that readers can indulge in. And it travels with the same grace and finesse as a figure of royalty.

But this sophistication doesn't make it ethereal. Despite the fact that creative nonfiction, in terms of style, can read like a novel, we can't forget that it is real. The vivid scenes and emotions that creative nonfiction writers conjure aren't ones of fantasy or other-worldly fiction. They involve raw, corporeal individuals and circumstances that have shaped real events. Unlike most standard pyramid-style news pieces or academic articles, works of creative nonfiction are more imaginative. While all writers—whether in nonfiction, creative nonfiction, or otherwise—select language and record details with careful attention and prudence, creative nonfiction exists on a middle ground that incorporates the groundedness of nonfiction with the flair of poetry. In its slogan, *Creative Nonfiction* magazine more simply describes the genre: "True stories, well told."

Aside from the blending of two different “worlds,” an additional source of confusion is that the terrain in which creative nonfiction lies can’t be pointed to with precise geographic coordinates. It covers a lot of ground.

In a book chapter titled “Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?” Hesse (2003) attempts to lay out this spectrum in more tangible terms. Creative nonfiction, he says, “serves as an umbrella term for a host of genres, including personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism, and certain traditions of travel writing, environmental writing, profiles, and so on” (p. 245). Creative nonfiction, however, is not defined by its subject matter, but instead by the way in which the information is presented.

A piece of writing on one’s own life can be written by simply explaining the hard facts of their day-to-day experiences, but it would more closely resemble a diary entry, not a memoir or personal narrative. An author can compose a piece on a foreign country they traveled to, explaining to readers each site on which they left footprints and how they spent their time. But it wouldn’t necessarily be considered travel writing without also making readers feel like they swam into a cave-like opening and washed ashore on a hidden beach tucked into the small, uninhabited islands of Las Marietas in Mexico, scooping crisp tostadas full of ceviche made fresh on the edge of the small, blue boat, flinching at the stings of a school of tiny jellyfish, and spotting a sea turtle bobbing atop the open sea; craned their neck to see the enormity of Rio de Janeiro’s Christ the Redeemer casting a long shadow over the tourists at his feet while embracing the city he is extending his arms out to, wrapping the surrounding population, small islands, and even the forgotten slums into his embrace; or climbed the hundreds of tight, winding stairs up to the duomo of the Santa Maria del Fiore, emerging at the top to find the air crisper at the higher elevation, feeling the wind cool the sweat you’ve broken, and observing the red rooftops of Florence from the city’s best view—and proposing why readers should know about it.

“Creative nonfiction reminds us that, while facts may be waiting for finding, interpretations are waiting for making,” says Hesse (2009, p. 21). “Even if facts are unassailable (the moon is a quarter million miles away; your mother and father got divorced when you were ten), what they mean and why they matter comes only when a writer invests them with significance.”

One true story well told is John Hersey's work of literary journalism, "Hiroshima," originally published in the August 31, 1946 issue of *The New Yorker*, the entire editorial space of which was devoted to Hersey's (1946) piece. It begins with this excerpt:

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department at the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk. At that same moment, Dr. Masakazu Fujii was settling down cross-legged to read the Osaka *Asahi* on the porch of his private hospital, overhanging one of the seven deltaic rivers which divide Hiroshima; Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor's widow, stood by the window of her kitchen watching a neighbour tearing down his house because it lay in the path of an air-raid-defence fire lane; Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German priest of the Society of Jesus, reclined in his underwear on a cot on the top floor of his order's three-storey mission house, reading a Jesuit magazine, *Stimmen der Zeit*; Dr. Terufumi Sasaki, a young member of the surgical staff of the city's large, modern Red Cross Hospital, walked along one of the hospital corridors with a blood specimen for a Wassermann test in his hand; and the Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto, pastor of the Hiroshima Methodist Church, paused at the door of a rich man's house in Koi, the city's western suburb, and prepared to unload a handcart full of things he had evacuated from town in fear of the massive B29 raid which everyone expected Hiroshima to suffer. A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors. They still wonder why they lived when so many others died. Each of them counts many small items of chance or volition—a step taken in time, a decision to go indoors, catching one street-car instead of the next—that spared him. And now each knows that in the act of survival he lived a dozen lives and saw more death than he ever thought he would see. At the time none of them knew anything.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima is an event that was, of course, covered heavily in the news and in books given its historical, scientific, and political significance. But while facts like the estimated casualties, physics behind the explosion, and other churned-out details of the bombing were reported repeatedly, John Hersey took

a creative approach to this journalistic piece that reveals a great deal more about six specific individuals impacted by the annihilation of their city.

In a news article—if a writer like John Hersey had also been located near the scene—these six people might have been quoted, saying, “I saw a giant flash of light and I didn’t know what was happening,” or, “There’s destruction everywhere. I’m trying to find my family.” Survivors of the experience may not even have been interviewed at all, and an American journalist may have simply cited military personnel who could comment on the attack, or a scientist who could explain the scale of the atomic bomb’s catastrophic force.

What readers are given in “Hiroshima,” however, is the unfolding of the same historical event, but through a lens capable of zooming out broadly enough to cover all the facts about the bombing and its implications, but also narrowing into tight frames that illustrate the selected survivors’ intricate narratives. One man wasn’t just Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge—he was a German priest relaxing in his underwear and reading a magazine, details which paint a scene of a private man enjoying a private morning, unaware of what would ensue. Hersey turned the bombing of Hiroshima into a narrative more rewarding to read, and he did it from an angle that makes the shock of the event much more astounding, given that these six people were enacting their mundane morning tasks at the beginning of an otherwise normal day.

Similarly, widespread information about John F. Kennedy has been recorded by political scientists, historians, and journalists—often so much so as to reach nauseating redundancy. But, arguably, no one has or ever will write about Kennedy’s presidential campaign in a more visionary fashion than Theodore H. White in his book *The Making of the President: 1960*.

With the end of the nominating process, American politics leaves logic behind.

If the conventions have done their work well, as normally they do, then the American people are offered two men of exceptional ability. Now they must choose. And they must choose in a primitive and barbaric trial. Although the contest is bloodless, the choice that ends the contest is nonetheless as irrational as any of the murderous, or conspiratorial, choices of leadership made elsewhere in great states. Until Plato’s republic of philosophers is established, leaders will always be chosen by other men, not out of reason, but out of instinct and trust. In America all citizens help choose.

It is to reach instinct and emotion that the great election campaigns are organized. Whatever issues are discussed, are discussed only secondarily, in an attempt to reach emotions. Logic has been dismissed with the conventions' end. Now other matters must be organized, on a different scale, by different men. Now registration drives must be mounted; now citizens must be fired with enthusiasm; now the explosive mechanisms of TV are wheeled into action. And all to the one point: so that the citizens—as they gather at rallies or read their newspapers or sit at home watching the candidates on TV—will be able to stew, mull, reflect and argue, until finally there simmers down in the mind and belly of each individual his own decision on choice of the national chieftain. (p. 211)

This passage exemplifies the type of ingenuity and insight that is virtually unobtainable in works of standard nonfiction. The book explains precisely what Kennedy was doing to pass the time on election day in a scene that maintained the same level of suspense as a movie segment, despite readers already knowing the outcome; it describes with pinpoint precision the Great Debates between Kennedy and Nixon, narrating the scenes of Kennedy studying a whirlwind of facts and figures from index cards while Nixon enjoyed an evening with his wife, of Kennedy changing into a darker, more flattering suit for television, and Nixon once again slamming his knee into a car door, his face going white, and his too-large suit hanging limply from his body after battling illness during the campaign; and it weaves hard facts and statistics on the campaign into an artistic portrait of the inner workings of American politics. Yet, *The Making of the President: 1960* earned Theodore H. White the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1962.

Just as inventive is George Packer's (2013) *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, which chronicles the breakdown of American institutions and culture through a series of biographical accounts of selected Americans and shorter vignettes of others. Consider this passage from the first chapter:

At the turn of the millennium, when he was in his late thirties, Dean Price had a dream. He was walking to his minister's house on a hard-surface road, and it veered off and became a dirt road, and that road veered off again and became another dirt road, with tracks where wagon wheels had worn it bare, but the grass between the tracks grew chest high, as if it had been a long time since anybody had gone down



the road. Dean walked along one of the wagon tracks holding his arms out spread-eagle and felt the grass on either side hitting the underneath of his arms. Then he heard a voice—it came from within, like a thought: “I want you to go back home, and I want you to get your tractor, and I want you to come back here and bush-hog this road, so that others can follow where it’s been traveled down before. You will show others the way. But it needs to be cleared again.” Dean woke up in tears. All his life he had wondered what he was put on earth for, while going in circles like a rudderless ship. He didn’t know what the dream meant, but he believed that it contained his calling, his destiny. (p. 9)

To me, these excerpts are anything but un-creative. To explain these aspects of Dean Price’s world—from the minister’s house to the chest-high grass—so vividly is the mark of effective creative nonfiction. And George Packer wasn’t just describing the scenery. While his details pare down the reader’s attention to the smallest minutiae (the grass wasn’t just chest-high, it was long because it was “as if it had been a long time since anybody had gone down the road”), they are each part of a bigger picture, a grander sense of meaning, that emerges subtly from taking the time to notice and describe them.

Packer’s *The Unwinding* has been described as both nonfiction and creative nonfiction, though. Even book reviewers at elite news outlets were not consistent in characterizing the book’s genre. National Public Radio described *The Unwinding* as containing Packer’s “nuanced style of literary journalism” (O’Malley, 2013); *The New York Times*, on the other hand, referred to it as “something close to a nonfiction masterpiece” (Garner, 2013). And, the book won the 2013 National Book Award in Nonfiction.

Yes, it’s true that creative nonfiction is a form of nonfiction, so descriptions like these aren’t contradictory or lying to us. What these disagreements and inconsistencies—or, at least, generalizations between nonfiction and creative nonfiction—tell us is that the lines in the sand are subject to the changing of tides from piece to piece.

But are these distinctions possible to make? Do they matter? When is a piece of nonfiction simply beautifully written?

For Carol Bly—author of essays, nonfiction, and short stories on writing—those perplexing questions don’t really have answers, even among authors and writing scholars. “Nobody knows what creative nonfiction is, and therefore it can be nearly anything,” she

says. “All you have to do is be truthful, tell things in your personal voice, and have your modus operandi be revealing your own life circumstances through anecdote or narrative and revealing the meanings you attach to those circumstances, rather than arguing a point. Creative nonfiction is basically about the author’s wisdom” (Bly, 2001, p. xvii).

No two writers will write creative nonfiction in the same way, nor will a stagnant writing approach stand up to decades of writers and their varying pieces of writing.

What it always will be, however, is a form of written expression in which an author’s genuine voice is maintained, and this authorial presence lends a narrative quality to the piece that flows freely as the writer perceived it. At its core, Bly (2001) suggests that creative nonfiction is “the most democratic, most natural form of writing we have” (p. xvii-xviii).

Despite the many liberties writers can take, there remain certain commonalities that works of creative nonfiction share, and Hesse (2009) has outlined some of these standards that we can draw from when we read creative nonfiction pieces and write some of our own:

*“A strong voice and authorial presence, with the writer figured as a teller or a character”* (p. 20).

What is initially striking about creative nonfiction is the sense that there is a person behind the text we are reading—not the characters being discussed, but a human that has crafted each word from both their imagination and their reality, and sewn them together piece by piece to bring us an individualized take on a definitive event. Through the scenes the writer has chosen to paint, through their careful selection of diction that describes hues, scents, reactions, and sentiment, readers are on the receiving end of a true experience distilled from the perspective of one person who experienced it—and that more individualized experience is celebrated. Unlike in, more specifically, a personal narrative or memoir, creative nonfiction is not necessarily about the author. It is about a lived occasion described from the unique perspective of a writer who handles language with the same attention as an artist. And that individual, that writer’s voice that we are told time and time again to dismiss and neutralize when we learn to write academically, shines through. Each word is a reflection of the author’s own lexicon, and each mark of punctuation accentuates the rhythm of the voice inside their head.

*“(Usually) a strong narrative quality”* (p. 20).

As writers, we tell stories. Even hard news articles and academic pieces—where “fluff” is frowned upon and conciseness is a virtue—certainly tell us what the exigence is for the news item or research, quote relevant sources, and instruct us as to how it happened, what we can do, or why it matters. Otherwise, the newspapers we read or the textbooks we consume would suffice in bulleted form, comprising a list of information that would sit immobile on the page. Narratives are a part of all of us—in fact, they define us—and so it is natural and essential to what most of us would consider valuable writing. But creative nonfiction uses narrative in a way that is different from both fiction and nonfiction. In fiction, an author has the liberty to create and narrate an entire world—what the characters said, how they said it, what they were thinking, and in what context they performed it. Narrative comprises the entirety of it, for we can make very few assumptions about the details of this imagined world. In nonfiction, writers tend to strictly call attention to the hard facts rather than embellishing the piece with unnecessary anecdotes and descriptions of scene. But, creative nonfiction believes in the power of that “unnecessary” filler, for the reliance on narrative and *storytelling* rather than just passing on information is at the heart of the genre. Yet, it also must balance this strong narrative style with interwoven facts. The blend of the two creates moments driven heavily by the senses and pairs them with the certitude of plain fact.

*“Language that surprises and delights—that calls attention to itself as language, rather than shying into transparency”* (p. 20).

When reading a standard news article or academic piece, facts are transmitted with precision and expedited to the reader via simple sentences and straightforward language. Here, the main points—the latest discovery, the new legislation, the thesis, and the lead—seem to be written in bold so as to not let readers’ minds digress too long from the important information, and they can relocate it with ease if they’ve made it to the end and forgotten. Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, is textured and seeks to describe events, places, and people with a perspicuity that can be largely attributed to the quality of the language. Like poetry, it excites with newly created metaphors, draws comparisons with allusions, amplifies with embellishments, incites frustration with dissonance, and makes phrases either dance or lie flat with varied syntax. Rather than language serving as

a vehicle for communicating meaning, it is integrated into the piece's meaning. Creative nonfiction still maintains the goal of transmitting conclusions based on facts and reality, but the language is also crafted to be noticed, to be enjoyed, and to be read with awe.

*“Surprising juxtapositions of facts, ideas, and experiences that lead to fresh insights; an often digressive, associative quality that, nonetheless, we find well formed”* (p. 20).

The aforementioned authorial presence, narrative style, and delightful language are evident in this fourth quality. We may be unused to feeling such a strong connection to a writer of nonfiction. The strong, pulling sense of narrative may startle us. And the poetic details may initially seem trivial, even tangential, to the story. But they've all been selected by the writer because they serve a specific purpose central to the piece's takeaway. In the end, great creative nonfiction uses almost any available devices, fusing fact with fiction and oscillating between poetry and prose, to present a comprehensive take on a topic that catches us off guard, excites us, and causes us to see these facts, ideas, and experiences under new light.

*“An insistent and celebratory sense that, while the author is writing about the world as it is and life as it happens, this truth is filtered through a consciousness whose goal is to make us pay attention and care”* (p. 20).

We write creative nonfiction for the beauty of it, but above all, we write it because the subject matter—and our fresh interpretations of it—requires telling. Recording human events is essential for our history books and our newspapers and our academic journals, but coloring them with the mark of individuality and insight that lasts and lingers in our minds is the chief goal of creative nonfiction. It is information that is not just absorbed, but experienced, and this sense of having accomplished something, of understanding something more deeply, is what readers of creative nonfiction gain.

All of these characteristics combined lead to a more elongated, more nuanced experience that Bly (2001) describes as such:

There is great advantage in slowing down the reader. A hobbled reader cannot keep flying over the sentence tops looking merely for the gist. One can't frisk along, pacey and shallow, the way one can when reading prose. Slowed, nearly halted here and there at line ends, you, the reader, are automatically dropped into a contemplative, spongy frame of mind. You take up the author's feeling the way your shoes take up

cold water when you wade in a stream, wading, like reading the poetic line, being a ponderous business...It is written in an informal spirit, with the profound hope that readers won't gallop along merely to identify the gist. Creative nonfiction, like poetry, is never written for gist. (p. xviii)

Creative nonfiction's final challenge, however, is dodging what many people believe to be an ethical disruption in the genre—whether the creative forces of the style combat, and sometimes counteract, the facts. Because the foundations of creative nonfiction, evident in Hesse's (2009) five characteristics, are all tinged with the individual perceptions of the writer, some question the validity of this perceived subjectivity. At what point does creative license threaten the sanctity of nonfiction? If creative nonfiction is enriched through the individual interpretations of the writer, have the impartial facts been jeopardized?

Rather than putting facts and truth at stake, creative nonfiction can, like anything else, be evaluated by the terms of framing rather than lying or falling victim to subjectivity. No piece of writing, whether nonfiction or otherwise, is exempt from the decisions communicators must make about how to transmit messages. Robert Entman (1993) explains that framing “essentially involves selection and salience.” When we frame information, we “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52).

When news reporters select certain people to quote, when they write a condensed headline, when they decide on the story's placement in the publication, and when they describe what is newsworthy, they are framing a perception of reality that can never match a “true” one—not because they are inadequate, but because it is impossible. The truth as we know it will never match Aristotle's Truth, because it is comprised of microscopic pieces of stimuli, of myriad rhetorical situations, and of varied cognizance, that change and evolve with each individual who has experienced it.

Creative nonfiction writers do nothing else but piece these fine points together in a manner that makes sense in new ways, is truthful, is interesting, and is lasting. We need

creative nonfiction just as much as we need nonfiction and fiction. It stimulates new parts of our brain and challenges us to be both critical and creative.

## SECTION 2: Creative Nonfiction Analyzed

In reading *Unbroken*, the following African proverb rings true: “When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.” With each passing day, fewer and fewer World War II veterans are living to tell their stories, to have their narratives preserved and curated by historians and authors. In writing *Unbroken*, Laura Hillenbrand (2010) undertook the difficult task of immortalizing one of these stories that history should not live without—the life of Olympic runner Louis Zamperini, whose career as an athlete was interrupted by the perils of war, launching him into an experience of terrors that seems beyond the scope of human endurance.

As a nonfiction book, Hillenbrand’s (2010) writing succeeds famously. Her command over words somehow synthesizes seven years’ worth of research—countless diary entries, letters, essays, telegrams, military documents, old photographs, “unpublished memoirs buried in desk drawers,” “deep stacks of affidavits and war-crimes trial records,” “forgotten papers in archives as far-flung as Oslo and Canberra” (p. 399), and 75 interviews with Louis Zamperini—with ease. Her reference section stretches across 50 pages of tiny print. Any nonfiction writer can vouch for the exhaustive nature of accumulating and organizing large quantities of information, then having to somehow thread them all together with language that makes it all flow seamlessly. Hillenbrand’s storytelling seems unwaveringly accurate, planting her firmly on the grounds of Hesse’s “Terra Facta,” where her perspicuity of information asserts the quality of her evidence.

As a creative nonfiction book, it is also strong. Hillenbrand’s ear for narrative is perhaps her strongest quality: she weaves drama into data, heart into history, poetry into prose. She scoops up samples of earth from Terra Imagina and scatters them evenly across her Terra Facta foundation. Indicative of her individual style, she does not lay down these portions of Terra Imagina in large piles, separating out sections of dramatic creativity here, removing them from flat spans of data there, and creating a sort of wandering narrative style that oscillates between linear, forward movement and meandering creative language. Instead, Hillenbrand spreads a thin layer of Terra Imagina

over the entirety of the novel, consistently adding a touch of imagination to otherwise dry nonfiction.

In evaluating *Unbroken* from the general attributes outlined by Hesse—authorial voice, strong narrative quality, language that surprises and delights, a digressive quality that presents fresh insights, all filtered through the consciousness of the author—Hillenbrand’s book presents strengths that are characteristic of strong creative nonfiction, while also shying away from others. Her end product, however, has been widely successful, demonstrating a case of how the ambiguity of the creative nonfiction genre does not necessarily weaken it.

**A strong voice and authorial presence, with the writer figured as a teller or a character.**

From the Preface (p. xvii-xviii):

All he could see, in every direction, was water.

It was June 23, 1943. Somewhere on the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean, Army Air Forces bombardier and Olympic runner Louie Zamperini lay across a small raft, drifting westward. Slumped alongside him was a sergeant, one of his plane’s gunners. On a separate raft, tethered to the first, lay another crewman, a gash zigzagging across his forehead. Their bodies, burned by the sun and stained yellow from the raft dye, had winnowed down to skeletons. Sharks glided in lazy loops around them, dragging their backs along the rafts, waiting.

The men had been adrift for twenty-seven days. Borne by an equatorial current, they had floated at least one thousand miles, deep into Japanese-controlled waters. The rafts were beginning to deteriorate into jelly, and gave off a sour, burning odor. The men’s bodies were pocked with salt sores, and their lips were so swollen that they pressed into their nostrils and chins. They spent their days with their eyes fixed on the sky, singing “White Christmas,” muttering about food. No one was even looking for them anymore. They were alone on sixty-four million square miles of ocean.

A month earlier, twenty-six-year-old Zamperini had been one of the greatest runners in the world, expected by many to be the first to break the four-minute mile, one of the most celebrated barriers in sport. Now his Olympian’s body had wasted to less than one hundred pounds and his famous legs could no longer lift him. Almost everyone outside of his family had given him up for dead.

From the very first pages of *Unbroken*, shown in the above preface to the book, Hillenbrand asserts herself as the “teller.” It is clear through her chosen language that what readers are about to embark on is not a history book of compiled facts, packaged

and published by a historian whose sole aim was accuracy in re-telling history, but something closer to a novel, where scene and imagery are relished. She assumes the primary role of narrator where, due in large part to her clear use of details, she seems to be explaining a scene that readers are already overlooking.

Hillenbrand's authorial voice is more masked in this book due to her decision to act as outside narrator rather than character, omitting first-person references that would have emphasized that this "reality" was filtered through her. Some creative nonfiction pieces make strong use of the "I," making it clear to readers that the imagery they are describing was seen in the moment through their own eyes, that the senses they are conveying and the emotions felt come straight from their own memory. But because Hillenbrand was not actually alive during World War II, let alone attached to Zamperini for the entirety of his journey, the story is filtered through Zamperini's consciousness, then through Hillenbrand's, which accounts for the more diluted authorial presence. Perhaps, in doing this, Hillenbrand was aiming to sway the genre of the book more towards nonfiction, although the sense of a creative author behind Zamperini's story, and one whose more linear and simple style of writing should not be mistaken for a lack of poetry, cannot be ignored.

This subtler writer's voice is not necessarily less effective, though. Hillenbrand's more muted voice reflects a strategy to place Louis Zamperini, the story's subject, at the heart of the book instead of calling added attention to her own style as a writer. The presence of Hillenbrand as an author is still evident. We hear her in her descriptions: "Their bodies, burned by the sun and stained yellow from the raft dye, had winnowed down to skeletons. Sharks glided in lazy loops around them, dragging their backs along the rafts, waiting." And we sense that her role as narrator plays a significant role in creatively shaping the story: "A month earlier, twenty-six-year-old Zamperini had been one of the greatest runners in the world, expected by many to be the first to break the four-minute mile, one of the most celebrated barriers in sport. Now his Olympian's body had wasted to less than one hundred pounds and his famous legs could no longer lift him. Almost everyone outside of his family had given him up for dead."

Such excerpts reveal Hillenbrand as a key player in this story, albeit a nuanced one, that actually has significant influence over the perspective of the narrative. She lets



readers in on insights outside of the immediate scope of the scene, slipping in bits of her authorial voice to paint scenes and add dynamics.

### **Usually a strong narrative quality**

From Chapter 12, “Downed” (p. 129-130):

The men watched the sky. Louie kept his hand on Phil’s head, stanching the bleeding. The last trace of *Green Hornet*, the shimmer of gas, hydraulic fluid, and oil that had wreathed the rafts since the crash, faded away. In its place, rising from below, came dark blue shapes, gliding in lithe arcs. A neat, sharp form, flat and shining, cut the surface and began tracing circles around the rafts. Another one joined it. The sharks had found them. Fluttering close to their sides were pilot fish, striped black and white.

The sharks, which Louie thought were of the mako and reef species, were so close that the men would only have to extend their hands to touch them. The smallest were about six feet long; some were double that size, twice the length of the rafts. They bent around the rafts, testing the fabric, dragging their fins along them, but not trying to get at the men on top. They seemed to be waiting for the men to come to them.

The sun sank, and it became sharply cold. The men used their hands to bail a few inches of water into each raft. Once their bodies warmed the water, they felt less chilled. Though exhausted, they fought the urge to sleep, afraid that a ship or submarine would pass and they’d miss it. Phil’s lower body, under the water, was warm enough, but his upper body was so cold that he shook.

It was absolutely dark and absolutely silent, save for the chattering of Phil’s teeth. The ocean was a flat calm. A rough, rasping tremor ran through the men. The sharks were rubbing their backs along the raft bottoms.

Louie’s arm was still draped over the side of his raft, his hand resting on Phil’s forehead. Under Louie’s hand, Phil drifted to sleep, attended by the sensation of sharks scraping down the length of his back. In the next raft, Louie, too, fell asleep.

Mac was alone in his wakefulness, his mind spinning with fear. Grasping at an addled resolution, he began to stir.

The vivid narrative prowess that Hillenbrand brings to Louis Zamperini’s story is arguably the strongest case for *Unbroken* as a creative nonfiction text. It fits perfectly with what Hesse (2009) outlined as a major component of creative nonfiction: being characterized by “a strong narrative quality.” Hillenbrand’s writing style in this book is nothing short of cinematic. It encourages readers to allow the story to unfold in their minds as a film would on screen. The text consistently contains forward, linear motion, as do movies, which drags readers along with it in anticipation.

Hillenbrand tends to write her descriptions in shorter, direct sentences. “A rough, rasping tremor ran through the men,” she says. “The sharks were rubbing their backs along the raft bottoms.” The story reads like the editing of a film would, jumping from shot to shot, quickly, because the mind can absorb the meaning of images almost instantly. Hillenbrand somehow manages to mimic these quick shots of film with her concise use of language, yet avoids sacrificing the vivid quality of the imagery. She chooses the right words, written with just the right tone, and the appropriate sentence lengths, in order to give the narrative the pull of continuous, driving motion. So much is captured in her portrayal of imagery, but it is never drawn out too wanderingly as to detract from the movement of the narrative. This narrative style is her main focus—to glide from beginning to end clearly and with direction.

In straight nonfiction, it is often the case that the research and the hard facts are simply placed onto paper with writing that strings it all together chronologically. Cause and effect, fact two followed by fact one. There is nothing wrong with this type of writing—we often need this one-dimensional style in order to objectively and thoroughly learn material. Hillenbrand recognized in Louis Zamperini, however, that this story requires a recreation of the drama, the suspense, and the terror that he lived. Without it, Zamperini’s story would have been memorialized in history as mere surface-level facts: Olympic runner enters war, survives at sea, endures torture as prisoner of war. The story might have become washed up among the thousands of other soldiers who fought through World War II, whose stories are so often memorialized in only the flat statistics of casualties or the often generalized and watered-down summations of veterans’ experiences in textbooks. Hillenbrand believed that Zamperini’s story, which also sheds light on the many soldiers who were victims of similar experiences, was deserving of a narrative style that brought history to life in a way that resonates with, and stings, readers.

There is no question that storytelling is Hillenbrand’s most prominent strength. She speaks with a profound authority over narrative, controlled and composed, that lingers with readers long after they turn the final page.

**Language that surprises and delights—that calls attention to itself as language, rather than shying into transparency**

From Chapter 1, “The One-Boy Insurgency” (p. 3-5):

In the predawn darkness of August 26, 1929, in the back bedroom of a small house in Torrance, California, a twelve-year-old boy sat up in bed, listening. There was a sound coming from outside, growing ever louder. It was a huge, heavy rush, suggesting immensity, a great parting of air. It was coming from directly above the house. The boy swung his legs off his bed, raced down the stairs, slapped open the back door, and loped onto the grass. The yard was otherworldly, smothered in unnatural darkness, shivering with sound. The boy stood on the lawn beside his older brother, head thrown back, spellbound.

The sky had disappeared. An object that he could see only in silhouette, reaching across a massive arc of space, was suspended low in the air over the house. It was longer than two and a half football fields and as tall as a city. It was putting out the stars.

What he saw was the German dirigible *Graf Zeppelin*. At nearly 800 feet long and 110 feet high, it was the largest flying machine ever crafted. More luxurious than the finest airplane, gliding effortlessly over huge distances, built on a scale that left spectators gasping, it was, in the summer of '29, the wonder of the world...

...Standing under the airship, his feet bare in the grass, he was transfixed. It was, he would say, “fearfully beautiful.” He could feel the rumble of the craft’s engines tilling the air but couldn’t make out the silver skin, the sweeping ribs, the finned tail. He could see only the blackness of the space it inhabited. It was not a great presence but a great absence, a geometric ocean of darkness that seemed to swallow heaven itself.

Hillenbrand’s impeccable skill for narrative and creating scene is derived from this particular characteristic of creative nonfiction—of crafting language that calls attention to itself rather than retreating invisibly from the page. Her personal style is more direct and concise than many creative nonfiction authors (attributed to the forward narrative style she exhibits above), but it still causes readers to pause and notice the beauty of her language as they move through the story.

Her diction in describing the *Graf Zeppelin* is elegant and pictorial—the zeppelin was not just grand, its presence created a “geometric ocean of darkness that seemed to swallow heaven itself”; it was not just large, it was “putting out the stars.” Her precision with words like “loped,” “tilling,” and “spellbound” contribute to the diversity of language so important to her more concise style of narrative. And the style captures the exact vision and sentiment that she wishes to transmit to readers.

It is a hard task for writers to pinpoint the exact words they want to use when there are so many, and yet sometimes not nearly enough. This mission requires an acute

sense of language, but also of rhythm, and a keen awareness of authors' own senses. Because Hillenbrand was not around when the scenes she would eventually describe were taking place, the task was even more difficult. She seems to succeed, however, in crafting language that showcases the essential details of each scene—not only commanding readers' attention toward the narrative, but also drawing focus to the specific language she has selected to transmit the message.

The nuances of her word choices ever so subtly communicate specific frames about the material. For example, the diction of the phrase “The yard was otherworldly, smothered in unnatural darkness, shivering with sound,” hints that the chilling presence of these types of war machines were unnatural, interrupting the comfort of unassuming American homes in the night. This elegant language seems to jump off the page to be appreciated by readers, encouraging them to grasp the underlying meaning of them throughout the book.

Despite the direct and linear style of her narrative, Hillenbrand's writing in *Unbroken* contains a texture that is undeniably creative and often poetic. Her message is amplified with imagery and excites readers with precise diction. It is clear that her main goal is transmitting Louis Zamperini's incredible story to her audience, but the execution of her writing contains an artful touch that lends an even richer quality to the history of Zamperini's experience.

**Surprising juxtapositions of facts, ideas, and experiences that lead to fresh insights; an often digressive, associative quality that, nonetheless, we find well formed**

From Chapter 35, “Coming Undone” (p. 351-352):

Louie was wrecked. The quest that had saved him as a kid was lost to him. The last barricade within him fell. By day, he couldn't stop thinking about the Bird. By night, the sergeant lashed him, hungry and feral. As the belt whipped him, Louie would fight his way to his attacker's throat and close his hands around it. No matter how hard he squeezed, those eyes still danced at him. Louie regularly woke screaming and soaked in sweat. He was afraid to sleep.

He started smoking again. There seemed no reason not to drink, so each evening, he swigged wine as he cooked, leaving Cynthia sitting through dinner with a tipsy husband. Invitations to clubs kept coming, and now it seemed harmless to accept the free drinks that were always offered. At first he drank just beer; then he dipped into hard liquor. If he got drunk enough, he could drown the war for a time. He soon began drinking so much that he passed out, but he welcomed it; passing out saved him from having to go to bed

and wait for his monster. Unable to talk him into giving it up, Cynthia stopped going out with him. He left her alone each night while he went out to lose the war.

Rage, wild, random, and impossible to quell, began to consume him. Once he harassed a man for walking too slowly on a crosswalk in front of his car, and the man spat at him. Louie gunned the car to the curb, jumped out, and, as Cynthia screamed for him to stop, punched the man until he fell to the ground. On another day, he was drinking, his mind drifting, when someone nearby yelled something while joking with friends. In Louie's mind, it was "*Keirei!*" He found himself jumping up, back straight, head up, heart pounding, awaiting the flying belt buckle. In a moment the illusion cleared and he saw that, again, everyone in the bar was looking at him. He felt foolish and humiliated.

One day Louie was overcome by a strange, inexplicable feeling, and suddenly the war was all around and in him, not a memory but the actual *experience*—the glaring and grating and stench and howl and terror of it. In a moment he was jerked back out again, confused and frightened. It was his first flashback. After that, if he caught a glimpse of blood or saw a tussle in a bar, everything would reassemble itself as prison camp, and the mood, the light, the sounds, his own body, would all be as they were, inescapable. In random moments, he felt lice and fleas wriggling over his skin when there was nothing there. It only made him drink harder.

From a creative nonfiction standpoint, the absence of this fourth characteristic—of surprising juxtapositions leading to fresh insights, and of a digressive quality that readers still find well formed—is perhaps Hillenbrand's weakest point. The strong, linear direction of her writing unfolds splendidly for the furthering of the book's plot and narrative, but it falls a bit short in providing fresh spin and making use of thoughtful, meandering phrases that complement the straight facts. Her language is eloquent and her scenes are well described, but it lacks certain insight that we expect from creative nonfiction in order to give the piece a higher sense of interpretation and discovery.

In the above passage, for example, Hillenbrand describes the crippling effects of posttraumatic stress disorder that countless veterans experience in their post-war lives. She describes the scenes with clarity: "No matter how hard he squeezed, those eyes still danced at him. Louie regularly woke screaming and soaked in sweat. He was afraid to sleep." Yet, it is almost too linear, too direct, in these scenes—a strategy that works so well in certain parts of the book, where the plot is riveting and time is passing, but that seems to leave incompleteness here.

Through the narrative of the novel, we get to know Louis Zamperini through his upbringing, his time as a soldier, and his life after returning home. But due to the constant

forward motion of the book, we don't get to really *see* and *understand* Louis Zamperini for all of his uniqueness and complexity. A more circumlocutory approach to certain sections of the book, where Hillenbrand would have allowed herself to deviate from the plot in order to provide insight and descriptive interpretation, might have assisted this book as a work of creative nonfiction.

Perhaps Hillenbrand felt that Zamperini's story spoke for itself—that because of its extremeness and consensus of remarkability, the angle was already formed and she did not wish to weigh in or contaminate the purity of the story through her authorial voice and interpretation. If so, that is certainly her prerogative as the writer and recreator of this story. However, the nature of the book also lent itself to describing and explaining in excruciating detail the traumatic psychological effects of warfare. Hillenbrand, in sections like the above excerpt, certainly touches on these terrors but doesn't quite reach a level of art (at least with this characteristic of creative nonfiction) that surprises readers with new facts and ideas. By allowing herself to, at times, write only tangentially to the immediate narrative, Hillenbrand might have discovered and shared new, creative insights on who Louis Zamperini really is that would have elevated the book to an even higher level.

**An insistent and celebratory sense that, while the author is writing about the world as it is and life as it happens, this truth is filtered through a consciousness whose goal is to make us pay attention and care.**

From Chapter 23, "Monster" (p. 236-237):

On a Sunday morning, Watanabe approached some POWs crowded in a barracks doorway. A POW named Derek Clarke piped up, "Gangway!" to clear a path. That one word sent Watanabe into an explosion. He lunged at Clarke, beat him until he fell down, then kicked him. As Bush tried to explain that Clarke had meant no harm, Watanabe drew his sword and began screaming that he was going to behead Clarke. A Japanese officer stopped the attack, but that evening Watanabe turned on Bush, hurling him onto a scalding stove, then pummeling and kicking him. After Bush went to bed, Watanabe returned and forced him to his knees. For three hours, Watanabe besieged Bush, kicking him and hacking off his hair with his sword. He left for two hours, then returned again. Bush expected to be murdered. Instead, Watanabe took him to his office, hugged him, and gave him beer and handfuls of candy and cigarettes. Through tears, he apologized and promised never to mistreat another POW. His resolution didn't last. Later that night, he

picked up a kendo stick—a long, heavy training sword—and ran shrieking into a barracks, clubbing every man he saw.

Watanabe had, in Bush's words, "shown his hand." From that day on, both his victims and his fellow Japanese would ponder his violent, erratic behavior and disagree on its cause. To Yuichi Hatto, the camp accountant, it was simply madness. Others saw something calculating. After Watanabe attacked Clarke, POW officers who had barely noticed him began looking at him with terror. The consequence of his outburst answered a ravening desire: Raw brutality gave him sway over men that his rank did not. "He suddenly saw after he hit a few men that he was feared and respected for that," said Wade. "And so that became his style of behavior."

Watanabe derived another pleasure from violence. According to Hatto, Watanabe was a sexual sadist, freely admitting that beating prisoners brought him to climax. "He did enjoy hurting POWs," wrote Hatto. "He was satisfying his sexual desire by hurting them."

A tyrant was born. Watanabe beat POWs every day, fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off, leaving men unconscious. He made one officer sit in a shack, wearing only a *fundoshi* undergarment, for four days in winter. He tied a sixty-five-year-old POW to a tree and left him there for days. He ordered one man to report to him to be punched in the face every night for three weeks. He practiced judo on an appendectomy patient. When gripped in the ecstasy of an assault, he wailed and howled, drooling and frothing, sometimes sobbing, tears running down his cheeks. Men came to know when an outburst was imminent: Watanabe's right eyelid would sag a moment before he snapped. (p. 236-237)

In selecting Louis Zamperini, Hillenbrand chose a subject that doesn't require much convincing to readers as to why the story matters. Through him, readers learn about the daily threats that soldiers encounter, the ruthlessness of battle, the inhumanity that many prisoners of war endure, and the psychological effects that linger long after the war is over. Hillenbrand's wish to convey these truths is evident throughout the book.

Some filters of Hillenbrand's consciousness are more subtle, however. Assuming Louis Zamperini and Laura Hillenbrand's accounts are true, it would be hard to argue a case for Mutsuhiro Watanabe being anything but an evil and barbaric captor. But despite an assumed consensus on this front, Hillenbrand still filters this story through her own consciousness that frames Watanabe as an absolute monster. Through accounts like these, Hillenbrand writes about the truth of war in a way that causes readers to care and remember the story months and years after they've put it down.

Due to Hillenbrand's lack of digressive writing style in *Unbroken*, the takeaways from this story live in the narrative itself, rather than being explained by her, but the

quality is still there. Readers leave the book with a clear understanding of why they have just spent the time learning about Louis Zamperini’s journey, and why Hillenbrand felt that it should be written.

The applicability of this rhetorical analysis is, of course, contingent in many ways on whether or not Laura Hillenbrand designed it to be a work of creative nonfiction in the first place. As with *The Making of the President: 1960* or *The Unwinding* (see section one of this chapter), the genre of creative nonfiction can often be ambiguous, making it difficult for audiences to assess the qualities of the genre from a composition or rhetorical standpoint. Assuming that *Unbroken* is a creative nonfiction book, however, Hesse’s five characteristics seem to be a clear way to evaluate and understand a real piece of creative nonfiction in print.

### SECTION 3: A Piece of Creative Nonfiction

#### “Accidents”

Millions blinked their eyes at the sun that morning, blearily stretching their arms out with muscle memory to muzzle their alarms. They tucked in their pressed shirts, moving their hands around their waist in a circle and jabbing them down into the top of their pants’ waistlines, and hoping for no odd creases. They zipped their fitted pencil skirts. They grabbed their lunches. Others boarded flights to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

I don’t remember what I did before, only after.

The mind has a strange way of operating on autopilot most days, causing us to forget the majority of what we do on a daily basis. Until something deviant happens, and then our minds begin to notice. Our memories soon become fixated on that transgression, circling back to that epicenter to which the rest of the day’s events can be traced.

I, too, probably prepared for the day—dressed, zipped my backpack, got myself into the car, said goodbye to my parents—though, at this point, my mind had not yet become fully engaged.

*7:59 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767 with 92 people aboard, takes off from Boston’s Logan International Airport en route to Los Angeles.*

Third grade was the year that we began to receive real letter grades in classes. By then, I suppose, we were mature enough to understand that our work was worth a specific



value—a standard among peers that we would use to judge our intelligence, at least a bit. That year, I discovered that I hated science, because I was bad at it.

Spanish Immersion students split their day between two teachers—English literature, history, and electives in English; science, mathematics, and Spanish language all taught in Spanish. I had my English subjects in the morning that year, swapping over in the afternoon and switching my brain on into bilingualism.

Others are on the subway, clamping their fingers around germ-infested metal poles for support. They're driving themselves, barely enduring traffic, or they're walking or cycling or taking cabs. They're heading into important buildings to make important decisions in the important cities of New York and Washington, DC. I wonder how important they felt that day.

*8:14 a.m. United Airlines Flight 175, a Boeing 767 with 65 people aboard, takes off from Boston; it is also headed to Los Angeles.*

*8:20 a.m. American Airlines Flight 77 takes off from Dulles International Airport outside of Washington, D.C. The Boeing 757 is headed to Los Angeles with 64 people aboard.*

*8:41 a.m. United Airlines Flight 93, a Boeing 757 with 44 people aboard, takes off from Newark International Airport en route to San Francisco.*

People are sitting at their desks now, their morning coffee hot and halfway through. Meetings are prepped, phone calls are made, and business-as-usual is prepared for. Some are running late—their alarms didn't go off, their kids were sick and they had to make arrangements, their planned suit was being dry cleaned, they missed their bus—and they don't yet realize that these mishaps were arguably the best thing to happen to them today.

*8:46 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11 crashes into floors 93-99 of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.*

*8:50 a.m. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card alerts President George W. Bush that a plane has hit the World Trade Center; the president is visiting an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida at the time.*

A picture that was shot of this moment by an accompanying photographer would soon find its way into history. President Bush continued reading to the elementary school students, trying not to let them in on the secret that we were under attack.

Just inside my school's walls, we're reading too. I snag one of the coveted bean bag chairs, lean my head back, and hold my book up to my face.

*9:03 a.m. Hijackers crash United Airlines Flight 175 into floors 75-85 of the WTC's South Tower, killing everyone on board and hundreds inside the building.*

Broadcast journalists witness this second crash on their own live screens. They pause in their tracks, trying to make sense of its reality, what it means, what they should say. Most of them come up with something like, “Oh my gosh... We’ve just... We’ve just now seen another plane crash into the second World Trade Center building. Can we replay that?... I think... I think there’s something more to this.” Panic is laced into their vowels, as if saying the right thing at that moment is both impossible and also crucial. The terror simmers low, the kind that’s perhaps most unsettling of all—it creates tension, cognitive dissonance, the impression that everything is normal while two buildings rage with heat on the screens behind their groomed hair and makeup.

A decade later, when I’m told that I would excel as a news anchor, I think of this moment and am reminded to take a different route.

An announcement was made for teachers to refrain from using their in-classroom televisions for instruction. I recall it being made over the intercom system, but it may have been a rumor spread among students clamoring for informational power. My teacher seemed a bit unsettled, but I didn’t think much of it, simply taking note of it and assuming she was disgruntled with the apparent technological glitches.

Workers in both towers are scrambling down one hundred flights of stairs, while police officers and firefighters make their way up.

*9:31 a.m. Speaking from Florida, President Bush calls the events in New York City an “apparent terrorist attack on our country.”*

One student gets called to the principal’s office, initiating the low churn of “ooooo” from classmates who whisper about innocent mischief. Red cheeks and low-pointed eyes leave the room, and they don’t return.

*9:37 a.m. Hijackers aboard Flight 77 crash the plane into the western façade of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing 59 aboard the plane and 125 military and civilian personnel inside the building.*

Abingdon Elementary School sits within a quiet residential neighborhood of townhouses in Arlington, Virginia. It’s home to a smattering of backgrounds—government workers’ children, immigrants from more nations than can be counted, some of the most influential Washingtonians and some of the poorest who barely speak English. Some of my friends have houses that seem to stretch on past the county itself. Many are on free or reduced lunch plans. I’m somewhere in between.

If you sit on the right hill—the one on which trees grow with their roots inclined and clinging to the sloping earth, the one on the left side of the building that’s wooded—you can see the border of Arlington and Washington. Just before it lies the Pentagon, its tip pointing inward toward the nation’s capital.

Later, my babysitter's daughter—who was in the middle school I'd be attending in a few years, located one mile from it—told me that they'd heard the impact of the plane crashing through the Pentagon's western exterior.

*9:59 a.m. The South Tower of the World Trade Center collapses.*

*10:28 a.m. The World Trade Center's North Tower collapses.*

By midday, about a fourth of my class has cleared out without explanation. At lunchtime, all of the students are sitting around normally. Either they hadn't noticed the oddities of the day, or they didn't care.

I walk up to a staff woman in the cafeteria. She was carrying a walkie-talkie, as many of the school personnel did, and I assumed that communicative device was a sign that she'd be able to answer my question.

"Why is everyone going home?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's leaving. Everyone keeps saying they have dentist's or doctor's appointments, but I know that can't be true. All on the same day?"

"Oh." She looked down at me and saw my eight-year-old face. She probably saw innocence, but I assume she also saw dumb. "There have been a series of accidents."

"Accidents? Like car accidents? All today? And parents are pulling their kids out of school for it?"

"Yeah. Your parents will probably tell you later." She walked away, ending the conversation before I could become suspicious or upset, but I already was.

*1:00 p.m. From a U.S. Air Force base in Louisiana, President Bush announces that U.S. military forces are on high alert worldwide.*

At some point midday, my babysitter picked me up from school. There weren't too many of us left by then. I don't remember being told exactly what was going on. I just remember seeing it.

By now, the Twin Towers had long been collapsed, but the footage played on a loop. I watched as two monstrous buildings—each seeming to be invincible, other than the smoke that billowed out of the places where airplanes had gouged holes in them—crumbled, floor by floor. They were standing, until they weren't. It was hard to imagine that there were thousands of people still trapped inside as the metal beams and carpet and glass cascaded down, but my mind wandered there anyway, wondering what it would be like to feel the weight of an entire building collapse in on you. I never asked my uncle,

who had been a surviving police officer, because I sort of knew the answer and understood that it shouldn't be described.

Clips of soot-covered New Yorkers provided close-up reactions of actual people. Some were running away from the destruction, others stood a few blocks away and watched in horror, or amazement, or shock. I closed my eyes when I saw specks of human bodies jumping out of the towers to avoid the blaze, not wanting to witness their corpses hit the ground.

A couple miles away, live film of the Pentagon was rolling. News stations alternated back and forth between New York and Washington, DC, sometimes showing both in a split screen mode. New York seemed distant, but the Pentagon was home. As I watched, I wondered how many people assumed the Pentagon was located in DC instead of where it actually was, in my hometown of Arlington. They probably know now, I thought.

On television, there wasn't a single channel that was displaying anything but the news. Newscasters were discussing the date, 9-11, and how it strategically matched the 9-1-1 dial code for emergencies in North America. I shivered in the way that happens when things eerily make sense.

"9-11, 2001," I said out loud.

"The 2001 part doesn't matter," my babysitter's eldest daughter said to me, but I had been repeating it more for my own memory of the day.

*6:58 p.m. President Bush returns to the White House after stops at military bases in Louisiana and Nebraska.*

After the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked, it was assumed that other high-profile buildings like the White House or the Capitol were going to be hit and a mass exodus of the nation's capital had commenced late that morning. My babysitter's husband worked in the U.S. Capitol and I wondered if he'd been evacuated and when he'd arrive. By the time President George W. Bush made it back to DC around 7 p.m., many Washingtonians were just making it home.

Mom had driven to work that morning, parking near her office building in the heart of DC. Late that morning, she had made the decision to abandon her car and walk home. In her professional attire, she navigated her way through throngs of panicked pedestrians and parking lot-type traffic manned by drivers wondering if they should abandon their cars, too. She saw black smoke rising from the Pentagon when she crossed Key Bridge. When she finally arrived back later, I asked her how she had walked all that way in her heels. She explained that she'd kept a pair of sneakers in her cubicle "just in case." That was indeed something she would have been prepared for, I thought. Dad was commuting to Columbia, Maryland at the time and he made it back late after picking up Mom on the way, too.

*8:30 p.m. President Bush addresses the nation, calling the attacks “evil, despicable acts of terror” and declaring that America, its friends and allies would “stand together to win the war against terrorism.”*

I had been mad at that woman in the lunchroom who’d lied to me about the day’s events. Even though I was only eight, I would have understood. I would have remained calm, I told myself, although I can’t say for sure whether or not I would have.

Perhaps she was right though, that I wouldn’t fully understand. I was confused as to why our Chilean friends cancelled their flight back to Chile that year. I didn’t quite comprehend why so many American flags went up on neighbors’ doors and in people’s yards—that the events of September 11, 2001 were inextricably linked with a national wound and identity. Still, at that moment, I’d been insulted by her white lie—the events weren’t insignificant, they’d be etched into my memory forever, and they were acts of terror. Anything would have been better than “a series of accidents.”

*Note: Italicized records of the timeline of events on September 11, 2001 were retrieved from History.com, cited in this chapter’s reference section.*

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*CHAPTER 2*

**POPULAR WRITING**



## SECTION 1: Popular Writing Research

Popular writing and creative nonfiction are often thought of as one and the same. Both rely on factual information as a foundation, but discuss and describe the topic with the goal of entertaining readers and telling a compelling story. Both forms employ language that excites, are meant to be enjoyed rather than tolerated, and are filtered through writers' consciousness to create a product grounded in individual perception. In popular writing, the writer's voice is preserved and we embrace it. Stylistically, there aren't too many concrete distinctions between the two.

However, the differences that do exist are significant enough to merit separate study. One of the more noticeable differences is in the types of publications that support each genre. Although there is certainly crossover, creative nonfiction is often found in long-form pieces that appear in full-length books or literary magazines while popular writing tends to be published by newspapers, more mainstream magazines, and their online mediums. What follows is that the readers consuming creative nonfiction versus popular writing are quite different, and so by distinguishing the two I have also indicated a type of audience rather than imply a dramatic difference in writing style. Popular writing tends to be more accessible to the public's everyday media consumption in mainstream publications and it is often geared toward a more "common" audience.

In addition to the mainstream and widespread public that popular writing caters to, the name itself connotes writing that is kairotic in spotlighting topics that involve current popular culture and trendy issues in politics, entertainment, and other industries. Popular writing comes with a certain assumption that readers will be up-to-date on current events, well-known leaders, and conflicts highlighted in the media. Without this pop culture capital, readers may not understand nuanced quips and anecdotes concerning celebrities, politicians, large corporations and their products, television shows, sports teams, and more. However, these topics can range from ideas and attitudes, to images and videos, and from products to people that exist within mainstream culture. Currently among pop culture icons are Oprah Winfrey, Diet Coke, blue Tiffany's boxes, iPhones, Meryl Streep, and Jimmy Fallon, but what exists within popular culture changes as often as public interest does. As soon as a revised law is passed, a new public figure rises in the media, a popular new product is marketed and sold, or an influential movie is released,

the dynamics of popular culture shift, and so does our popular writing. For this reason, pieces of popular writing must recognize kairotic moments that exist within a certain window of opportunity. Otherwise, our writing is not current, it depletes its meaning, loses its intrigue, and surrenders its persuasiveness.

Popular writing, perhaps more than any other genre, primarily serves a social function. At its core, the genre exists to link members of pop culture through the issues, people, products, and ideas that bind us. In many ways, popular writing has the power to dictate what hot-button topics remain salient in mainstream culture while also framing them in more unique and opinionated ways than what we see in traditional news media. While popular writing exists in many forms and on widespread topics, I will focus on three of the most published: profiles, reviews, and commentaries.

## **Profiles**

Apparently *The New Yorker's* offices, with what we've come to know as their timeless production of something close to journalistic and literary genius, used to buzz early on with the statement that the magazine's founding editor, Harold Ross, invented the Profile.

"If a Profile is a biographical piece—a concise rendering of a life through anecdote, incident, interview, and description (or some ineffable combination thereof)" says current editor of *The New Yorker* David Remnick (2000), "well, then, it's a little presumptuous to stick Ross at the front of the queue" (p. ix). But if by profile we mean something slightly different, something a little more complicated and difficult to emulate—"something sidelong and ironical, a form that prized intimacy and wit over biographical completeness or, God forbid, unabashed hero worship" (p. ix)—then Ross may claim the genesis. Later on, editors and writers at *The New Yorker* and publications elsewhere carried it out and have evolved it over time.

Remarking from a book titled *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker* that he has compiled from the stacks and stacks of them written for the magazine over the years, Remnick (2000) speaks of the style in what he and his *The New Yorker* cohorts would probably like to think of as profiles in their highest form. They span from profiles of "malice" to profiles of "praise," ones about "identity" and ones about "the strangeness of

American fame,” jumping from dark to humorous, from insight to amusement, and often both within the same piece.

“What had been conceived of as a form to describe Manhattan personalities now travels widely in the world and all along the emotional and occupational registers...” said Remnick (2001). “[But]...one quality that runs through nearly all the best Profiles...is a sense of obsession. So many of these pieces are about people who reveal an obsession with one corner of human experience or another” (p. xi).

I’d agree that there’s something fascinating about a sense of obsession bleeding through the pages of a profile, whether it stems from the subjects themselves or through the fixated writer. But it might be discouraging to read Remnick’s words and assume that if you’re not interviewing a person who is particularly obsessive, or you as a writer aren’t particularly fanatical about the subject either, that you are doomed from writing an excellent profile. What can be equally impressive, in fact, is speaking to what appears to be a remarkably dull person, unearthing a crevice of their life that is interesting, and writing about it in a way that reflects that fascination.

Perhaps a broader, more forgiving word for the concept that Remnick speaks of is “focus.” There is undoubtedly a thread that runs through profile subjects and writers of intense focused energy and attention. The individuals we choose are intriguing because they are incredibly concentrated on something, whether it’s Dave Grohl’s rise from Nirvana grunge rocker to devoted father and president of his own record label (see the Financial Times Magazine’s 2011 profile of him and the Foo Fighters [Wilkinson, 2011]), or Jeffrey Goldberg’s hotheadedness and polarizing reporting on Israel (see *The Washingtonian*’s 2013 profile on “Washington’s Most Pugnacious Journalist” [Starobin, 2013]). Similarly, writers of good profiles are engrossed in their subjects, never counting details out of the big picture, and they strive to capture the entire essence of a person, with a narrow slant, in one relatively short piece.

I’m not sure any of this means they are always obsessive, though. Remnick is right in the sense that many of the best profiles I’ve read maintain a central theme of obsession, but it’s not the sole, or required, foundation for a remarkable profile.

There's something so intriguing about the concept of a profile. It's only one piece of someone's biography—just a few snapshots, the rest left as mystery, for figuring out, for piecing together—but it is somehow able to encompass so many aspects of their life story nonetheless. This characteristic, of only focusing on one featurette of a person's life, is perhaps one of the two most important identifying factors of a profile.

Unlike a biography, a profile's aim is not in documenting all the available facts of an individual's life and filling in the entirety of their most important experiences with intimate details. In biographies, readers are given one long, generally chronological, recording of a person virtually from birth or childhood until death, or at least up to their current age or peak of interest. In reading most biographies, we feel like we know the subject well—as if we were a bystander for each stage of their life, listening in and watching their life unfold, standing transparent in the corners—and get an overarching sense of who they were and how their life events shaped them. In a profile, however, the writer narrows in on only one frame of interest in the subject's life. It might be centered on the person of intrigue's current influential role in an industry, their rare talent for a certain skill, their business chops, their salvation, their survival, or their uniqueness among blandness; either way, profiles only give readers access to the subject through this narrowed lens, yet the quality and pixilation of this frame heightens our overall perception of them. “Sometimes, profiles seem to take place in real time,” says John Trimbur, author of *The Call to Write* and specialist in composition and writing studies. “Such profiles create a sense of immediacy and intimacy...” (Trimbur, 2014, p. 202-203). Unlike in a biography, readers sense that they're not only witnessing the subject's life, but are immersed in it, brushing shoulders with them and being a participant. “Readers of profiles have come to expect that they will be able to visualize people and places, to hear what people sound like, and to witness revealing incidents,” (p. 203) says Trimbur, and that is what they are given. The difficulty of a profile—but the beauty of it if we can achieve such a level—is to narrate the subject in such a way that readers know the subject intimately through the profile's depth, yet there is also a certain distance between the subject and reader that stems from the piece's narrower breadth and generates an intriguing figure of secrecy; it seems that the writer has chosen these particular segments and the rest have been curtained off for the VIPs and closest companions. Profiles aren't

generally written to be relatable (or, sometimes they are, briefly, because all individuals share certain threads of humanity), but there's an overarching sense of celebrity about the subject that puts them on a different tier.

The second characteristic is that we choose these specific windows of subjects' lives in order to report a particular slant about them. Profiles aren't entirely comprehensive, but instead report on segments of a subject's life to give us an overall impression of them filtered through the writer's perception. These slants may be Steve Jobs's behind-the-scenes coarseness despite his genius (see *Rolling Stone's* "The Steve Jobs Nobody Knew" [Goodell, 2011]), rocker Jack White's "carefully curated world" (see *The New York Times Magazine's* profile "Jack Outside the Box" [Eells, 2012]), or a sort of un-funny Jon Stewart with the "burden of history" (see *Esquire's* profile of him, although *Esquire* doesn't seem to interview him directly [Junod, 2011]). But regardless of the slant, it's ideally something surprising, something we don't already know about the subject that is provocative or stimulating. When we do stray away from the immediate frame and slant—transporting readers back to some scenes from the subject's childhood, or if the profile is more about a subject's "past life," lurching readers forward in time to what they'd eventually become—it's to complement both, to support our perception of them, whether it's good or bad, to fill in some of the missing pieces. All profiles will make use of slant, whether it's subtle or not, sloping readers towards liking a subject, hating them, exposing them, explaining them, or simplifying them. "No matter how immediate a profile seems to be, it's helpful to remember we are not seeing a person or a place or a group directly, but rather through the eyes of the writer," says Trimbur (2014). "A profile—and the impact it has on readers—depends as much on the writer as on the subject profiled. Profiles express, explicitly or implicitly, the author's point of view" (p. 203). Profiles aren't written simply to document a person's life—although they do—but to present them under an intentionally selected and crafted light.

When Sarah Corbett (2006) wrote a profile on reggaetón artist Daddy Yankee for *The New York Times Magazine*, she, interestingly, broke Daddy Yankee up into three parts: Daddy Yankee "El Rey" and reggaetón superstar, whom women flock to and men want to hang out with; Raymond Ayala, the "real" guy who grew up in a housing project in Puerto Rico; and the "sneaker version" of Daddy Yankee, which is an extension of "El

Rey,” but seems to also serve as some indication of his future on a continuously global and profitable scale.

By the time Daddy Yankee stepped out of his silver BMW sedan into the steamy heat of midday, dressed nattily in a black T-shirt and an impeccably pressed pair of jeans, two pancake-size diamond-crusted “DY” medallions dangling auspiciously from his neck, San Juan’s lunch hour was in full swing...Heads swiveled. Traffic slowed. Drivers lowered their windows...

...“It’s unified the Latin masses,” Daddy Yankee told me, adding that he believes reggaetón is especially popular with second generation immigrants, even those who don’t speak Spanish. ‘The music makes them feel Latino,’ he said. ‘It’s in their heart.’”

...Yankee seemed pleased with his sneaker, and also with the complete “DY” apparel line Reebok intends to introduce in the spring. The proposed copy for the print advertising campaign was ‘For the people.’ Yankee nodded his head as this was explained to him. ‘The concept is good, powerful,’ he said. ‘The message is there: I’m representing you.’”

Despite this nuanced division, the parts about “Raymond” still oscillate between past and present in order to complement the chosen frame (Daddy Yankee at present, who is Raymond Ayala’s luxurious and idolized alter ego) and slant (how “keeping it real,” staying true to his street-life roots and promoting raw Puerto Rican music to wider audiences, is contrasted with growing transcontinental stardom and wealth).

To write a good profile is to understand that everyone has an intriguing story tucked away into the forgotten, or perhaps ignored, crevices of our daily lives. We uncover these narratives through profiles and submit them to popular culture because people intrigue us, and writers’ takes on them—after having had the chance to connect with the subject on some level—intrigue us even more.

## Reviews

It is impossible for us as humans of judgment to refrain from constantly crafting reviews in our heads. Any time we consume something or engage in an activity, we produce an automatic reaction to these products or events that guide us to purchase more or continue participating. The majority of the reviews we pen inside our minds are trite, and we either discard them or tuck them away to be called on at a later time. But it is in

turning these judgments into something more refined, more purposeful, and more social that we encounter the genre of review writing.

“At the center of all these reviews are the criteria used to make evaluations,” says Trimbur (2014), and “the criteria reviewers use may be explicit or implicit” (p. 343). Perhaps these criteria are most evident in restaurant critics who, in their evaluations, touch on taste, service, ambiance, price, and other traditional schema of the overall experience. For books, on the other hand, things aren’t always as scripted. Among the countless points book reviewers can speak about are plot, character building, extent of research used, dialect, suspense, topic, and overall writing style. When these types of criteria aren’t clear, we get an overall impression of a restaurant, a travel destination, or a movie that highlights some standout items, whether good or bad. Regardless, readers should come away from the piece with a clear sense of what the writer’s opinion is and how they formed it. And, Trimbur (2014) reminds writers, “Whether readers find a review persuasive will depend to a large extent on whether they believe the criteria used are justifiable” (p. 343).

Aside from providing an opinion about an experience, reviews generally serve one of two practical roles: they either allow readers to participate in the experience by proxy, or they allow readers to compare their own experience with that of the reviewer. The unifying force behind both, however, is that review writing should transport readers to a place, serving as their tour guide as they witness the lush lanes of grapes in an Oregon vineyard; include them as a participant in a culinary experience, allowing them to taste the sweet barbeque flavor of smoked meat in Memphis; or, guiding them through a literary journey, making them feel as though they have also absorbed the newly released *New York Times* bestseller. And in order to do so, the language used in reviews is descriptive and exciting.

Consider the following review of “Mexico’s New Costa Alegre Hideaways” (Chaplin, 2014) in *Travel + Leisure* magazine:

I’ve always loved this stretch of Mexico for its unabashed decadence. Anchored by Puerto Vallarta, the Costa Alegre spans south of Banderas Bay into the states of Jalisco and Colima, along Highway 200, a.k.a. Carretera Pacifico. Since at least the 1960’s...the region has attracted utopian leisure visionaries, naturalists, surfers, and eccentrics of all tan lines. They have found a tolerant local culture that includes the Huichol Indians—

who make trippy peynote-ritual crafts, some with fluorescent pom-poms—and the lush, welcoming beauty of bougainvillea and grassy fields, night air that feels like silk, and a climate so near perfect that many houses are built without walls.

An ideal review is also not simple. Reviews don't just make evaluative statements (“boring,” “thrilling,” “must-try,” “never going back”...) without substantiating them, nor is it an opportunity to rant or praise aimlessly. There will be things we love, others that don't quite meet our expectations, and it is through the creative and artful descriptions of our experiences that we support the evaluation we're making. When a movie was delightful, good reviewers describe why: it might have been the written screenplay that excited audiences and put a fresh spin on an old story, perhaps the actors performed career-defining roles, or it might have been the advanced visual display that made fantasy seem so real. What was good about the film and what wasn't? When a travel spot is unimpressable, they also fill us in: the transportation could have been too difficult, hotels might have been more expensive than they were worth, or there was little to do for entertainment. If you travel to this destination, what can you expect to be good and what can you expect to be mediocre? Ideally, a review should be focused, homing in on what was positive, what was negative, and why. By the end of the piece, readers should have a clear understanding of what the reviewer appreciated, what they didn't, and what they can expect to experience if they choose to see the movie, read the book, or dine at the restaurant.

Tom Sietsema's (2013) review of The Inn at Little Washington in *The Washington Post* is an example:

Not every dish soars. Shrimp with chorizo is the sort of dish that might impress on an upgrade in the sky, but not on this hallowed ground. The Inn's desserts erase any aftertaste of the ordinary, though. I *dare* you not to swoon when you spoon into the brilliant pineapple-lemon grass sorbet, served alongside pink peppercorn granita, or “grandmother's” apple tart, a pie by way of Paris. Or heaven. When a bug dropped into my glass of Roland Tissier et Fils Sancerre Rose, the sommelier whisked it away with typical grace and humor: “At least it has good taste.”

Don't be too cynical, but don't be uncritical. Be truthful, but constructive. Perhaps the worst reviews are ones in which the author seems to be unleashing an unfiltered reaction that provides little reflection or productiveness. I once read a professional review



that lambasted a restaurant, encouraging patrons that they could get better Italian food at a Papa John's. While this may have been the writer's initial reaction, the statement came across primarily as rude, secondarily as polarizing, and thirdly as unconstructive. Some reviewers may pride themselves on being a tough critic—and reviews are, in essence, opinion pieces—but we write reviews for the readers, both everyday citizens and the people who may benefit from our input. The sous chefs, the authors, and the film producers, along with their consumers, should find our reviews to be descriptive, creative, truthful, and tasteful.

Roy Hoffman (2009) does it tactfully in his *The New York Times* review of Pat Conroy's book *South of Broad*:

The technique Conroy has used so successfully in earlier works — a lone storyteller urgently sifting and interpreting a chaotic world — becomes constricting here. Our view of Leo's friends is foreshortened by his obsession with “the great arching motion of my life.” We often miss their own urgent need to heal, to press on. It's as if Leo, the newspaper columnist, has churned through this material too many times before, leaving it sapped of its vitality.

Conroy remains a magician of the page. As a writer, he owns the South Carolina coast. But the descriptions of the tides and the palms, the confessions of love and loss, the memories “evergreen and verdant” set side by side with evocations of the “annoyed heart” have simply been done better — by the author himself.

Above all, reviews are for other people. In serving its social function, the reviews we write for popular writing publications are crafted in order to be read, consumed, and used by other people. When we describe and pass on our evaluations of whatever it is we are reviewing, we have the power to set up expectations for readers that they anticipate to be polished, thought-out, interesting, and helpful. While we can expect that many of our readers will disagree with our judgment, we must still strive to make reading reviews an enjoyable experience that makes writing them worthwhile.

## **Commentaries**

There are immense benefits of the standards journalists must follow for traditional news-style writing. As “the fourth branch of government,” our press thrives in both of its roles as watchdog over governmental and societal affairs as well as liaison between

public figures and the constituents they represent. We expect that they will report as objectively as possible—a feat that is impossible, but that they must strive for nonetheless—and that what they report will be truthful.

When we read about current events, we tend to receive them in this objective reporting style. Which is why commentaries, when written well, have the potential to stand out to readers and incite action in a way that news stories can't. However, the task of writing commentaries is, in many ways, becoming more challenging. Particularly now that gatekeepers at newspapers and magazines aren't the only ones deciding what opinion pieces are circulating through the digital public sphere, excellent commentaries are often buried, and the sheer number of them that are now constantly available makes the good ones harder to remain salient.

“Commentary is a genre of writing that uses analysis and interpretation to find patterns of meaning in events, trends, and ideas,” according to Trimbur (2014). “The purpose of commentary is not simply to report things but to give readers a way to make sense of them” (p. 283). News stories, for example, permeate our public sphere with far more information than we could ever process and remember, let alone act on. Because of this, commentaries stand out by inserting analysis, anecdote, an authorial voice, and a clear stance and interpretation. They resonate with us at a higher level because of the human behind the text—a writer who is synthesizing the information on a current event and voicing his or her opinion on it with a personal twist. We read commentaries partly for information, but more so because we're intrigued about what the writer has to say, what their take on an issue is, what they attribute the problem to, and how their own original style is going to provide a certain freshness on a popularly reported topic. Commentaries are often written to adjust the status quo, but some may seek to preserve it if a widespread threat seems strong enough to change it.

The purpose of a commentary is to, quite literally, make some kind of comment on a policy, a social issue, a current event, or a similar state of affairs. Commentaries take what has been reported—the who, what, when, where, why, and how—one step further and identify the root of the problem, describe what causal factors have led to it or predict what effects we can expect, explain the manner in which this issue is impacting us, and

suggest a course of action that society must take. News pieces fill us in on what is happening; commentaries ultimately expand on why we should care.

Trimbur (2014) identifies one of the first characteristics of commentary writing as “perform[ing] a *labeling* function, identifying current trends and giving readers names for these trends” (p. 283). Through commentaries, we’ve become familiar with terms like “slacktivism,” for example, referring most often to forms of social media activism that produce few monumental results. But even if commentaries aren’t coining specific new terms or phrases, they often generate new frames of reference, unique analogies, or original ways of thinking about a topic that stem from writers’ freedom to let their own opinions shine through the facts.

In her opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Sonia Nazario (2014) creates a new title for the United States’s immigration crisis, reframing it instead as a “refugee crisis”:

But lately something has changed, and the predictable flow has turned into an exodus. Three years ago, about 6,800 children were detained by United States immigration authorities and placed in federal custody; this year, as many as 90,000 children are expected to be picked up. Around a quarter come from Honduras — more than from anywhere else.

Children still leave Honduras to reunite with a parent, or for better educational and economic opportunities. But, as I learned when I returned to Nueva Suyapa last month, a vast majority of child migrants are fleeing not poverty, but violence. As a result, what the United States is seeing on its borders now is not an immigration crisis. It is a refugee crisis.

A second aspect of commentaries is that they seek to “find patterns of meaning in events, trends, and ideas...[and] call on readers to think about the *causes and consequences* of what is happening in the world today” (Trimbur, 2014, p. 283). Commentary writers are able to identify causes and consequences of current events that aren’t necessarily evident in the recent news coverage of them. They often rely on factual events that occurred (“it was the passing of this bill...” or “it was this amount of corporate spending...”), but the fact that they are identifying and framing them as causes or consequences is more subjective. Like any good writing, commentaries must substantiate opinions by anchoring them to facts, and identifying the links between origins, outcomes, and the current issues they are linked to, is an opportunity to do so.

Sonia Nazario (2014) continues this aspect of her commentary here:

Gangs arrived in force in Honduras in the 1990s, as 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha members were deported in large numbers from Los Angeles to Central America, joining homegrown groups like Los Puchos. But the dominance in the past few years of foreign drug cartels in Honduras, especially ones from Mexico, has increased the reach and viciousness of the violence. As the United States and Colombia spent billions of dollars to disrupt the movement of drugs up the Caribbean corridor, traffickers rerouted inland through Honduras, and 79 percent of cocaine-smuggling flights bound for the United States now pass through there.

Narco groups and gangs are vying for control over this turf, neighborhood by neighborhood, to gain more foot soldiers for drug sales and distribution, expand their customer base, and make money through extortion in a country left with an especially weak, corrupt government following a 2009 coup.

Third, “in the process of explaining, commentators often apportion *praise and blame*—whether of solidarity, indignant reaction, or ironic distance” (Trimbur, 2014, p. 283). In order to propose solutions and suggest courses of action, commentaries point to sources of praise that have championed the cause the writer speaks of or at least have the right idea, and they critique sources of blame that are contributing to or perpetuating the identified problem. Readers often require frames of reference in order to understand the dynamics of the problem, and if they can link them to well-known and understood people (a president, for example), organizations, (say, the National Rifle Association) and other schema, readers are handed an informational shortcut that expedites their understanding of the issue.

Among the various sources of praise and blame in Nazario’s (2014) piece is a flawed plan created by President Barack Obama’s administration:

Instead of advocating such a humane, practical approach, the Obama administration wants to intercept and return children en route. On Tuesday the president asked for \$3.7 billion in emergency funding. Some money would be spent on new detention facilities and more immigration judges, but the main goal seems to be to strengthen border control and speed up deportations. He also asked Congress to grant powers that could eliminate legal protections for children from Central America in order to expedite removals, a change that Republicans in Congress have also advocated.

Above all, “...the call to write commentary grows in part out of [a] desire to analyze and explain what happens around us—to have satisfying accounts of our experience and to find patterns of meaning that can make the world cohere” (Trimbur, 2014, p. 284). The art of commentary and opinion writing is in drawing connections—between correlated events, and between the writer and the public—that help frame and shape the issues we face. Commentary writers put their opinions to paper because they want their input to be heard, but an effective commentary also connects people and events, inspiring not just thought, but action and change.

## SECTION 2: Popular Writing Analysis

### Profile

#### “The Soloist” by Joan Acocella

*The New Yorker*, 1998

As it appears in *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker* (Remnick, 2000)

Though Baryshnikov directs a company, the White Oak Dance Project, he went to Riga in October alone, as a solo dancer, and next week (January 21st–25th), at the City Center, in New York, he will again perform by himself—his first solo concerts, ever, in the United States. There is something fitting in this. The things he now seeks in dance—the exaltation, the self-discovery—are easier to find if one is not lifting another dancer at the same time. Furthermore, audiences these days don’t want their view of him blocked by other people. But, basically, solo is his natural state, the condition that made him. The rootlessness of his childhood send him into himself—made him a reader, a thinker, a mind—and the rule of force he worked under in the Soviet Union had the same effect: it made him cherish what could not be forced, his own thoughts. This became a way of dancing. It is not that when he is performing he is telling us who he is. Rather, he is telling us, as fully as he can, what truth he has found in the role, what he has thought about it. In many of his solos today, he seems to be giving us a portrait of thought itself—its bursts and hesitations, the neural firings—and this is something one must do solo.

...

“...But to tell the whole story of my mother, it’s a long story.” The end of the story is that during the summer when he was twelve she took him to the Volga to stay with her mother and then went back to Riga and hanged herself in the bathroom of the communal apartment. Vladimir found her. Baryshnikov never knew why she did it. “Father did not want to talk about it,” he told me. Soon afterward, Vladimir left for

the Army, and the father told Misha that now they would live together, just the two of them. The following year, Nikolai went away on a business trip and returned with a new wife, a new life. “I understood that I am not wanted,” Baryshnikov said.

He looked for other families. He spent most summers with the family of Erika Vitina, and he stayed with them at other times as well. “Quite often,” Vitina says, “he would ring our doorbell late at night, saying that he had run away. But a week later I would receive a call from the ballet school”—she, too, had a child enrolled there—“and would be told that unless I sent Misha home they would have to call the police. We spent two years in this manner. From time to time, he’d come stay with me, and then his father would take him away again.” Insofar as Baryshnikov has lived a life of exile, it had begun.

...

“I got lucky,” he adds. “I fell in love with dance.” Every ounce of energy he had was now channeled into ballet. According to Juris Kapralis, who became his ballet teacher two months after his mother’s death, he was a child workaholic: “Very serious boy. Perfectionist. Even in free time, go in corner and practice over and over again. Other boys playing, Misha studying. And not just steps, but artistic, as actor. He is thinking all the time what this role must be. I remember, once, ‘Nutmacker.’ He was thirteen, perhaps. I was prince, and he was toy soldier. After Mouse King dies, Misha relax his body. No longer stiff, like wooden soldier. Soft. Our ballet director ask him, ‘Who say you should do this?’ And he answer, ‘When Mouse King dies, toys become human. Toys become boys. Movements must change.’ He devise that himself. Small boy, but thinking.”

To write a profile on Mikhail Baryshnikov is an attempt to capture, without exaggeration, one of the world’s greatest ballet dancers of all time. A biography on “Misha,” as he is nicknamed, might be easy—he has lived a full, successful life, with a rich background and career. And due to his fame, the line of his life has been covered by countless sources and information is ample. Writing a profile, however, and trying to get at the roots of Baryshnikov through a unique and specific frame—especially given the quantity of information about him that already existed at the time the profile was written—is a challenging endeavor. But Joan Acocella, writing for *The New Yorker*, has managed to do it beautifully.

Acocella said herself in the profile that writers often typecast Baryshnikov as the expectedly tortured soul and longing-for-home character that we expect from Soviets who defected to the West in 1974. These evaluations, however, are too easy and, as Acocella claims, just plain wrong. “It is hard to find an article on Baryshnikov that does

not describe a look of melancholy in his eyes, supposedly the consequence of exile from his Russian homeland,” she says, “This is the dominant theme of writings about him, but in his view it has nothing to do with him” (p. 62). In his own words, Baryshnikov told her, “The minute plane set down, the minute I stepped again on Latvian land, I realized this was never my home. My heart didn’t even skip one beat” (p. 62). In “The Soloist,” Acocella seeks to approach Baryshnikov from a new and more accurate perspective, discovering the intricacies of his life that have shaped his dancing.

In returning to David Remnick’s quality of obsession in profiles, or my preferred word of “focus,” Acocella has captured it. Both her own sense of focus, and Baryshnikov’s. I have said that the mark of an intriguing profile stems from the amount of focus or concentration that the human subject has, but also the writer’s fascination with and focus on them and unearthing aspects of their “true” identity. It appears in Baryshnikov’s hairsplitting, but genius, quest for detail and precision: “According to Juris Kapralis, who became his ballet teacher two months after his mother’s death, he was a child workaholic: ‘Very serious boy. Perfectionist. Even in free time, go in corner and practice over and over again. Other boys playing, Misha studying’” (p. 66). And it is also manifested in Acocella’s whole-hearted determination to portray Misha correctly: “It will never wholly mend, any more than Baryshnikov, child of that break, was ever able to find an artistic home. But it is hard to regret his fate. Homelessness turned him inward, gave him to himself. Then dance, the substitute home, turned him outward, gave him to us” (p. 78). Her keen perception of Baryshnikov’s roots, scars, and triumphs is the mark of a writer who has maintained a clear-cut focus in the process of describing Misha’s identity, and is, yes, in this case, “obsessively” aware of her subject.

The first characteristic in differentiating a profile from a biography is, of course, the strategy of only framing the piece around certain aspects of the subject’s life. Acocella seems to tackle this with ease. Jumping between Baryshnikov’s childhood, early years as a professional ballet dancer, and substantial moments in his career, always returning to the present, Acocella has mastered the ability to convey photographic moments, only allowing herself to explain Misha’s life in a handful of significant snapshots. Profiles are about specific defining moments in a subject’s life, not a continuous thread of them, and Acocella selected the most important ones to support her

specific frame of Baryshnikov's life: his rocky, but wildly successful, career as a dancer. All of the episodes she has selected to include from his life all serve the function of framing this career. His mother's suicide is not included for analyzing Baryshnikov's psychological path, but is used as a tool to discuss his dancing. His rocky path as director of the American Ballet Theatre was not just part of a chronology, but a device used to put his career into context. And all of this was done at a level of incredible detail, heightening readers' sense of knowing Baryshnikov through these lenses. Acocella pauses in her writing for paragraphs of mere description, painting a portrait of Misha at a given time. "He gave them the double barrel turns, he gave them the triple pirouettes in attitude (and then he switched to the other leg and did two more)" (p. 78) Acocella said. "He rose like a piston; he landed like a lark...From ledge to ledge of the dance he leapt, surefooted, unmindful, a man in love" (p. 78). Describing a meeting she observed with Baryshnikov and two of his colleagues, she says, "Baryshnikov showed them his shoes—jazz shoes, Western shoes—and Ritenbergs and Kapralis unlaced them, peered into them, poked the instep, flexed the sole. They were like two veteran wine makers inspecting a new kind of cork. Whatever feelings passed among the three men, they were all subsumed into work" (p. 64). As I have mentioned, the quality and pixilation of these frames in profiles heightens our overall perception of the subject while also leaving gaps of mystery and intrigue—a perfect combination that lures readers in to great depths, but also leaves them wanting more.

Next, the slant is clear, and highly perceptive of Acocella. The piece, titled "The Soloist," refers to Baryshnikov's actual role as soloist in his ballet career, but also plays on the name as a tribute to his independence, but also his isolation, inwardness, and, more so in his recent career, often creative misunderstanding. He grew up mostly alone, sleeping on the couches of his ballet instructors and classmates' homes. He maintained an inward focus in dance lessons, captivated by a desire to constantly improve. Despite his genius, he lagged as director of the American Ballet Theatre, loathing the fundraising and parties for patrons. Even now, in performances by his company White Oak, audiences are confused by some pieces, holding out simply to see the genius of Baryshnikov performing solo. This slant, of Baryshnikov as a soloist in many senses of the word, is what differentiates Acocella's profile from the rest of the writings about him. The angle



is astute, and beautifully communicated. The creative elements of this popular writing piece shine through majestically. "...But what has made him an artist, and a popular artist, is the completeness of his performances," Acocella says, "the level of concentration, the fullness of ambition, the sheer amount of detail, with the cast of the shoulder, the angle of the jaw, even the splay of the fingers, all deployed in the service of a single, pressing act of imagination" (p. 62). "He filled the ballet to its skin" (p. 74), she says later.

As it turns out in Acocella's profile, the "look of melancholy in [Baryshnikov's] eyes, supposedly the consequence of exile from his Russian homeland" (p. 62) that many writers have ascribed to him is, more compellingly, the opposite case. Despite the training and the strong mentors Misha had in Russia, his time in the Soviet Union broke him subtly. First, in his familial and home life, where suicide and rejection became themes of his childhood. And then, at the beginning of his dance career, it stifled his creativity and freedom with dance. Dancers were followed and monitored to ensure that they did not defect; their artistic liberties were choked out as new and modern ballets were vetoed by the company's *artsoviet*. A friend of Baryshnikov's provided insight on what might have happened to Misha had he stayed in Russia: "He'd be a ruin by now...both physically and mentally. Physically because of the bottle...Mentally because of that mixture of impotence and cynicism that corrodes everyone there—the stronger you are the worse it is" (p. 71). All of the work that Baryshnikov has done in the United States since then, however understood it might be by certain audiences, is a response to this suffocation for years, grasping at opportunities he didn't have in his early years as a professional ballet dancer. "Baryshnikov was the new sensation of Western ballet," Acocella says, "and if, with his fame, he also had a sad look in his eyes the cause was probably not nostalgia for the Soviet Union" (p. 72). The art of the profile is unearthing these crevices of a subject's life, piecing together episodes of their full story to provide an interesting perspective. Acocella has achieved this in spades, tackling an artist with as much history, talent, and depth as the legendary Mikhail Baryshnikov.

## Review

### **“One Diva to Another: This Role is Divine” by Anthony Tommasini**

*The New York Times*, 2008

An opera company does not decide to mount a production of Massenet’s “Thaïs” and then look for a soprano to sing the title role. The only reason to produce this ultimate star vehicle today is that a company has a genuine star who wants to sing it.

...

For decades the opera has claimed only a marginal place in the standard repertory. So even with a soprano of Ms. Fleming’s audience appeal, the Met was not about to mount its own production just for her. Instead it has imported a 2002 staging by John Cox from the Lyric Opera of Chicago, a high-camp affair with exotically ornate new costumes for Ms. Fleming designed for this occasion by Christian Lacroix. The baritone Thomas Hampson, who sang Athanaël opposite Ms. Fleming in Chicago (and has recorded the opera with her), returns to the role here, and he was in top form.

...

The libretto, adapted by Louis Gallet from a novel by Anatole France, tells of two lost souls crossing paths on opposite spiritual journeys. Thaïs is such a successful courtesan that to hire her services for just one week, Nicias, a rich Alexandrian (here the robust tenor Michael Schade), must sell a vineyard, a mill and some lands. Athanaël, who as a young man was nearly diverted from religious life by Thaïs’s beauty, determines to salvage her soul. Yet as she slowly renounces her sinful life, he succumbs hopelessly to his erotic longing for her.

Ms. Fleming, who has always made deliberate decisions about repertory, has said that the role of Thaïs could have been written for her. Her performance proves her point. Though filled with lyrical flights to the upper register and some florid singing, which she handled beautifully, the vocal lines mostly hover in the soprano’s midrange, where Ms. Fleming’s sound is especially rich, sensual and strong.

...

In the scene most crucial to this drama of conversion, Ms. Fleming and Mr. Hampson are inspired. It takes place in a desert oasis near the convent of Albine. Thaïs, exhausted from traveling, her feet bleeding, can go no farther. Athanaël entrusts her to the care of the welcoming nuns. In a couple of impassioned outbursts Mr. Hampson pushed his voice worrisomely. But for the most part he sang with plaintive sound and sensitive lyricism.

...

Anything goes in staging “Thaïs.” On Saturday afternoon, while working at home, I was listening to the Met radio broadcast of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” and then switched to a recording of “Thaïs.” The contrast was stunning. “Where’s the music?” I wondered. “Something’s missing.”

Anthony Tommasini's (2008) evaluation of the opera "Thaïs" for *The New York Times* is one that contains all the needed elements of a successful review. Weaving in elements of the opera's plot with his own judgments about its execution, the review is a blend of opinion and support, fact and commentary. It is clear, constructive, and descriptive.

Of the several characteristics of reviews (see section one of this chapter), establishing justifiable criteria is perhaps most important. If readers sense that the evaluations being made are not based on legitimate standards, the author loses credibility with its audience and surrenders their power over providing and influencing opinion. Typically, writers can look to the genre of their review material for clues. In Tommasini's case, he defaulted to the elements of opera for evaluative criteria: casting, plot, orchestra, singing, costumes, performance, and staging or visual set. Commenting on each aspect of the opera, he based his judgments on standards that fit the genre of opera, giving the review logic amid personal opinion. He described the costumes as "exotically ornate," a violinist's solo as "beautifully refined," and the staging as essential ("Anything goes in staging 'Thaïs.' On Saturday afternoon, while working at home, I was listening to the Met radio broadcast of 'Tristan and Isolde' and then switched to a recording of 'Thaïs.' The contrast was stunning. 'Where's the music?' I wondered. 'Something's missing.'").

Tommasini's ability to allow his readers to participate in "Thaïs" by proxy, or allow readers who'd seen the opera to compare their own experience to his, was skilled. By alternating paragraphs between plot-related content, applicable history about the opera, and his own impressions of the performance, Tommasini enabled readers to sit in the theatre seat next to him, as if privy to his nonverbal reactions and secret whisperings throughout the show or at intermission. For example, Tommasini says, "In the midst of a vocal outpouring, Ms. Fleming climbs a winding staircase just so she can deliver a triumphant high C from the top landing, then scurries back down to face the humiliated monk as the curtain falls." This ability to draw readers into participating in the event is derived from descriptive and action-filled language, language that comes off the page and describes a holistic experience of the event—what the author's ears were hearing, what their eyes were seeing, what reverberations their body was sensing. Tommasini certainly

found ways to keep his language inventive, citing “Massenet’s melodic gift...in full furl”; Ms. Fleming’s “lyrical flights to the upper register and some florid singing, which she handled beautifully,” but also the “vocal lines mostly hover[ing] in the soprano’s midrange, where [her] sound is especially rich, sensual and strong”; and Ms. Fleming’s performance of Thaïs as “flirtatious and tempestuous, [where] the poignant colorings of her voice tinge her singing with sadness, lending ambiguity to her defiance.” His language presents an experience close to being present at the opera, giving his readers a detailed frame of reference for his views.

Lastly, reviews require a clear overall opinion that is substantiated with critical, but constructive, feedback. Tommasini’s reaction is straightforward: the opera was great, but Renée Fleming as Thaïs was most impressive. He began the piece by stating that an opera company does not decide to put on “Thaïs” without significant confidence in a knockout female to play the lead, but Tommasini felt that “Ms. Fleming justified the company’s faith by delivering a vocally sumptuous and unabashedly show-stealing Thaïs.” The overwhelming majority of his adjectives were celebratory: “conducted with beautiful restraint,” “star vehicle,” “compelling,” “invaluable Ms. Fleming,” and he says that baritone Thomas Hampson was in “top form.” For sake of balance, however, Tommasini’s review was not without its barbs. “In a couple of impassioned outbursts Mr. Hampson pushed his voice worrisomely,” he says, “But for the most part he sang with plaintive sound and sensitive lyricism.” Readers come away from the review with a clear sense of what was great and what fell short, all while Tommasini maintained a professional and constructive tone.

With each essential piece of a review in place, in combination with Tommasini’s ease in writing descriptive and memorable language, this review offers a compelling case for readers to buy tickets for this opera performance. Because, above all, reviews evaluate places or experiences for other people, authors have tremendous power over framing readers’ perceptions of the reviewed subjects and determining whether or not they will purchase the item or attend the event. Here, Tommasini has provided a well-rounded account of the opera, praising where he felt was deserved and criticizing where he sensed something was lacking. He buoys his position with evidence and is persuasive in complimenting the opera and encouraging his readers to see “Thaïs.”

## Commentary

### **“Welcome to Cancerland” by Barbara Ehrenreich**

*Harper's Magazine*, 2011

Yes, atheists pray in their foxholes—in this case, with a yearning new to me and sharp as lust, for a clean and honorable death by shark bite, lightning strike, sniper fire, car crash. Let me be hacked to death by a madman, is my silent supplication—anything but suffocation by the pink sticky sentiment embodied in that bear and oozing from the walls of the changing room.

...

Like everyone else in the breast-cancer world, the feminists want a cure, but they even more ardently demand to know the cause or causes of the disease without which we will never have any means of prevention. "Bad" genes of the inherited variety are thought to account for fewer than 10 percent of breast cancers, and only 30 percent of women diagnosed with breast cancer have any known risk factor (such as delaying childbearing or the late onset of menopause) at all. Bad lifestyle choices like a fatty diet have, after brief popularity with the medical profession, been largely ruled out. Hence suspicion should focus on environmental carcinogens, the feminists argue, such as plastics, pesticides (DDT and PCBs, for example, though banned in this country, are still used in many Third World sources of the produce we eat), and the industrial runoff in our ground water. No carcinogen has been linked definitely to human breast cancer yet, but many have been found to cause the disease in mice, and the inexorable increase of the disease in industrialized nations—about one percent a year between the 1950s and the 1990s—further hints at environmental factors, as does the fact that women migrants to industrialized countries quickly develop the same breast-cancer rates as those who are native born. Their emphasis on possible ecological factors, which is not shared by groups such as Komen and the American Cancer Society, puts the feminist breast-cancer activists in league with other, frequently rambunctious, social movements—environmental and anticorporate.

...

No, this is not my sisterhood. For me at least, breast cancer will never be a source of identity or pride. As my dying correspondent Gerri wrote: "IT IS NOT O.K.!" What it is, along with cancer generally or any slow and painful way of dying, is an abomination, and, to the extent that it's manmade, also a crime. This is the one great truth that I bring out of the breast-cancer experience, which did not, I can now report, make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual—only more deeply angry. What sustained me through the "treatments" is a purifying rage, a resolve, framed in the sleepless nights of chemotherapy, to see the last polluter, along with, say, the last smug health insurance operative, strangled with the last pink ribbon. Cancer or no cancer, I will not live that long of course. But I know this much right now for sure: I will not go into that last good night with a teddy bear tucked under my arm.

Barbara Ehrenreich's commentary, "Welcome to Cancerland," was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in November 2001. I have said that because commentaries are a form of popular writing, ultimately for the common public and differentiated from long-form works of creative nonfiction, they are generally published in news sources and popular magazines rather than literary ones. This still remains true, but despite "Welcome to Cancerland" being printed in a literary magazine as a long-form work, I have chosen to share and analyze the content and message of Ehrenreich's message here because it is still, first and foremost, a commentary.

Ehrenreich writes this piece with a familiar reliance on narrative which, in commentaries, helps readers acknowledge the issue as a personal interest of the writer, one that they understand at great depths and have a stake in, and which has led them to care enough about the topic to compose a commentary. Using a circular structure that is so effective when storytelling, Ehrenreich begins the commentary with clips of personal memoir on her breast cancer diagnosis; in the middle, she weaves in facts, current events material, economic and social factors, all making a case for her stance; and, in the end, rounds out the piece by returning to excerpts of memoir where she describes her experience in being deemed cancer-free.

From the outset Ehrenreich makes her point clear: breast cancer, and its related Breast Cancer Awareness Month, has been converted from a vile and deadly disease into a cheerful, lucrative event that also perpetuates the worst characteristics of hegemonic femininity. When describing her experience with mammogram screenings, Ehrenreich points out that "almost all of the eye-level space has been filled with photocopied bits of cuteness and sentimentality." After being diagnosed, she finds that there is an unspoken code within support groups and chat rooms that bans anger and resentment toward the disease. She finds that breast cancer, and all of the products that supposedly go along with it, reduce her and her disease to one big, happy, pink event with few helpful results, and she makes sure to point out who and what is to blame for this societal ill.

The most vital part of a commentary is to make some kind of statement about an issue that is currently going on in society, and Ehrenreich certainly did that. But there are other more nuanced parts of the genre without which a commentary would fall flat: a sense of timeliness, a strong authorial presence with creative voice and style, references

to research or statistics that support the author's claims, and a conviction that by outlining causes, consequences, and remedies for readers, the issue can be fixed. Ehrenreich has, expertly, included these too. The article, published in a November issue of *Harper's Magazine* (which, in typical magazine fashion, generally arrives to subscribers and newsstands about one month in advance), nails readers right during October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Her mastery of language and rhetorical devices calls attention to her voice as a writer: "In my last act of dignified self-assertion, I request to see the pathology slides myself...Most of them are arranged in staid semicircular arrays, like suburban houses squeezed into a cul-de-sac, but I also see what I know enough to know I do not want to see: the characteristic 'Indian files' of cells on the march...these cellular conga lines..." She consistently provides evidence to support her stance, using relevant and convincing facts (see, for example, paragraph two in the above excerpt). And, she did a thorough job of pointing to the causes of our culture's breast cancer bonanza, its consequences, and how we can change it.

As previously mentioned, John Trimbur (2014) identified three functions of effective commentaries: "perform[ing] a *labeling* function, identifying current trends and giving readers names for these trends," "find[ing] patterns of meaning in events, trends, and ideas...[and] call[ing] on readers to think about the *causes and consequences* of what is happening in the world today," and, through the process of explaining, "apportion[ing] *praise and blame*—whether of solidarity, indignant reaction, or ironic distance." Each of these is successfully executed in "Welcome to Cancerland" at various points.

The labeling function of Ehrenreich's commentary is evident in the title—"Cancerland" is what she calls it, a term that connotes otherworldliness, perhaps removed from reality, more specifically relating to a cult-like membership that worships all things pink, feminine, and cute. The "sisterhood" of breast cancer is a world of its own, but one that is growing larger and more commodified each year. More subtly, Ehrenreich creates a label for the "relentless brightsiding" of breast cancer, referring to the constant euphemisms used in discussions of breast cancer. Her phrase mirrors similar ones that have been invented for the same purpose, such as the "tyranny of cheerfulness" cited in the documentary *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (Din & Pool, 2011). This strategy arms readers with

terms that help them more adequately and descriptively frame the issue when engaging in discourse about the topic.

After narrating patterns in the issue, Ehrenreich identifies both causes and consequences of her perceived Cancerland. Among many causes are these: the fact that previously hard-hitting and feminist advocacy is now mostly comprised of “a general chorus of sentimentality and good cheer...after all, breast cancer would hardly be the darling of corporate America if its complexion changed from pink to green”; the “overwhelmingly Darwinian culture that has grown up around breast cancer,” in which survivors are championed and “martyrs count for little”; and our “implacably optimistic breast-cancer culture,” where, due to the inundation of beauty products thrown at women, “you can defy the inevitable disfigurements and come out, on the survivor side, actually prettier, sexier, more femme.” The consequences: little money actually donated to cancer research, an emphasis on treatment rather than prevention, and—for many women—a sense that if they’re mad about their breast cancer or succumb to its vise, they’re not part of the pink be-ribboned clan.

Finally, Ehrenreich locates sources of praise and blame for Cancerland. She praises good intentions when applicable: “Fortunately, no one has to go through this alone. Thirty years ago, before...pioneer patients spoke out, breast cancer was a dread secret, endured in silence and euphemized in obituaries as a ‘long illness’”; “awareness beats secrecy and stigma”; or, referring to the idea that being diagnosed with a deadly disease can inspire a self-fulfilling prophecy and downward spiral of death, “so, it could be argued, the collectively pumped up optimism of breast-cancer culture may be just what the doctor ordered.” All of these praises, however, are qualified by a significant “but.” And, to justify her rejection of the status quo, there is of course blame: organizations like the Susan G. Komen Foundation, which may “fritter away up to 25 percent of its gross” on overhead and advertising alone, or the sick irony of Breast Cancer Awareness Month being “sponsored by AstraZeneca (the manufacturer of tamoxifen), which, until a corporate reorganization in 2000, was a leading producer of pesticides, including acetochlor, classified by the EPA as a ‘probable human carcinogen’” thought to lead to diseases like breast cancer.



Barbara Ehrenreich's "Welcome to Cancerland" succeeds for various reasons. Her ethos, which is so necessary to the personalized writing of commentaries, is firmly secured from the beginning. She interweaves her own narrative with facts and history that support her stance. It is timely. She points out causes and consequences, praise and blame. She makes sense of an otherwise complicated and multi-faceted issue. And she makes it clear that this is a problem. With all of these qualities in combination with her superb writing style and creativity, Ehrenreich has produced an example of a commentary that is hard to ignore and, perhaps more so, forget.

### SECTION 3: Popular Writing Pieces

#### PROFILE

##### **Joseph Larson, who surprised everyone but himself**

*Sometimes in life we think we have drive. Then we hear stories like \*Joseph Larson's.*

\*Name has been changed for privacy

If you happen to catch Joseph Larson grabbing his double shot espresso every morning, he looks much like the suit-and-tie, briefcase-in-hand worker we expect to brush elbows with some of the government's most influential employees.

Every morning, he makes the fifteen-minute walk from his home in Northern Virginia to the metro station and commutes on the Orange and Green Lines to Washington, D.C. I've made a similar Arlington-to-Washington commute during rush hour, observing the hard-faced, overtired, overachieving men and women in suits whom I'd like to offer a smile and a cup of strong coffee.

But something tells me Larson would catch my eye. Even if I weren't aware of his profession, something about the quizzical, concentrated, and analytical way he was reading the newspaper might tip me off: he's a lawyer. But he's not the guy with an earpiece in, swiping and tapping his iPhone screen. He's the kind of man who—perhaps by his legal training, but more likely because of his inherent disposition—pensively absorbs information; the kind of man who, on a daily basis, makes critical legal decisions, yet is far beyond the intellectual limits of taking one's self too seriously.

One thing I wouldn't guess about Larson by my metro observation, though, is this: he is a high school dropout. Without a high school diploma, or even a GED, to his name, Larson climbed himself out of a broken family, an abandoned home, and a completely "adult" life thrust upon him at the shy age of ten years old.

Growing up in the Los Angeles basin, Larson spent the first ten or eleven years of his life in what he described vividly as a typical one-story, single-family house in the foothills of the San Bernadino mountains. He fondly recalled running barefoot and shirtless through the orange and lemon groves surrounding his house, basking in the 70s-and-sunny atmosphere of Southern California.

Larson described himself as a great student who enjoyed performing well and achieving good grades. “At the start of the year in second grade they gave me some tests and sent me to a third grade class,” he explained. But being a year younger and physically smaller than his classmates, Larson felt socially removed from his peers (he joked that, standing about 5’5” now, he was small to begin with). “I spent a lot of time in the library at recess instead of on the playground. I read a lot and was a bit reclusive.”

Still today, there’s something quite reserved yet so present about his demeanor—the type of person who often lets the extroverts of the world do the talking, but, when prompted, could shock any loudmouth to silence with his quick wit and unwavering knowledge on a subject of anyone’s choosing.

At about the same time that his home life became shaken, his time spent at school grew a bit rockier as well. “I remember around sixth grade being unwilling to accept authority that I felt was unjust,” he described. “I mostly got along with teachers, but there were a couple of really insecure, bullying types, and I really didn’t accept that well.”

As Larson read about and studied education, he became increasingly convinced that the school system he belonged to was flawed. “I was openly critical of some of my teachers’ methods, which landed me in the principal’s office,” he admitted. “I remember telling one poor science teacher in middle school that he was wasting our time.”

Behind the series of disagreements between Larson and his teachers, however, was a childhood falling apart at its seams. “My parents were really smart and loving people, and we had a very close family until I was about ten or eleven years old,” Larson said. “At that point, my family began to fall apart. My poor mother had a very rough time of it, and I ended up taking care of her while she went through a very difficult self-destructive stage after my father left.”

Larson revealed that while his mother did wind up marrying a nice guy, it only followed after a couple remarriages and various failed relationships. Amid these unsteady relationships, however, the men his mother kept as company were neither friendly nor accepting of having Larson around. He and his mother lost contact for quite a while. His relationship with his father wasn’t much better. “My father was mostly absent after that point in my life,” Larson said. “He tried to stay in touch, and I know he really loved me and my sister, but he was busy living his life, so we didn’t spend much time together.” His older sister, likewise, had a difficult time adjusting to the family’s new dynamic and lived with her boyfriends in the years following.

“My family house was vacant, as my father had left and my mother had moved out, and I actually lived there alone for a while, until the house was sold as a part of their divorce and I had to find another place to sleep,” Larson explained. “It was just as well, as the house kind of gave me nightmares—I’m sure just remnants of the family I had lost.”

Surprisingly, Larson remained confident, self-sufficient, and found various jobs as he tackled his newfound independence as a youngster. He didn’t get into trouble and seemed satisfied with the freedom he acquired, kept an emotional distance from others, and grew a hard shell.

Still, the combination of his battered home life and his resistance to the school system culminated in his decision to leave high school. “I gradually came to the realization when I got to high school that I had better things to do than sit in a classroom. I had really read a lot about education at that point, and became convinced that I could pretty much learn what I needed to learn in other ways,” he said.

So, he stuck out his sophomore year, got straight As to prove he could handle the work, and then dropped out.

“This was absolutely perfect for me at the time, since I really was living from one friend’s apartment floor to the next, and loved the anonymity. It was really liberating, and I was perfectly happy to move on,” Larson recalled. “It was insanely easy for a kid that age, at that time, to kind of disappear into the suburban landscape.”

Hearing Larson’s viewpoints toward formal education at the time is reminiscent of a California-bred, more put-together, Will Hunting—minus the attitude and the bitterness. It seemed clear to Larson that learning was a matter beyond the confines of structured education; no matter if he maintained enrollment at an institution, his desire to learn would naturally crop up in all aspects of his life.

After leaving high school, Larson made his living from a variety of small jobs—everything from dishwashing, bussing tables, cooking fast food, painting houses, and working as a tech in animal hospitals. He explained that he never spent money on anything other than food, so these jobs were sufficient.

Describing himself as having long hair and dressing poorly, Larson became a “hippie” and protested the Vietnam War at a young age. “I was fascinated by the counterculture, and read a lot,” Larson remembered. Still a lover of literature, Larson read everything “from Ginsburg’s poetry (‘Howl’) to Ken Kesey (‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’) to Thoreau’s ‘Walden’ and pretty much everything written by Hermann Hesse.” He often hitchhiked to get around, and made trips to the San Francisco area as it was a “Mecca” for hippies at the time.

It wasn’t until he was about seventeen that he truly acknowledged the wounds he’d never healed. After attending a self-development course, Larson was able to tap into deep-seated feelings about those turbulent years. Surprised at his own grief after years of independence, he admitted, “I was shocked to find that I was heartbroken by the loss of

my happy family and cried and cried about it at the training. I had a chance to grieve the loss, finally, which I think helped me move on.”

Despite his resistance to formal education in his early years, Larson was still an academic at heart. Soon, he grew bored of his life without the thrill of education in it, so he enrolled in several courses at the local community college as well as the local State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly Pomona). Meanwhile, Larson landed a job in a lab at the City of Hope where he assisted in lab work on animals for human disease research. “The doctors in the lab took an interest in me and encouraged me to get a degree,” he said. “I applied to the University of California at San Diego and was shocked to find I got in.”

At UCSD, Larson studied Linguistics and fell in love with it. He also enrolled in a French class, which led to him studying abroad. Describing himself as an opportunist, Larson discovered that he could get a student loan and spend a year in France during his junior year without working. After graduating from UCSD, he soon attended American University for law school.

Larson recalled a conversation he had with the registrar at American University about his lack of a high school degree or GED. “I remember the registrar looking at my transcript and noting, shocked, that I never graduated from high school. I remember asking if that was going to be a problem, but she just said, ‘No, I just haven’t ever seen this before!’”

What is perhaps most notable about Larson is the normalcy with which he treats his road to success and his forgiveness of the situation he was tossed into. “I think everyone has adversity and challenges,” Larson said. “I loved the freedom I had as a youngster. I think it gave me a great deal of confidence, and I had some amazing experiences.”

Speaking to his humility and compassion, Larson actually attributed much of his success to his family. Remembering his early childhood fondly, Larson feels grateful for the love his family showed him in his early years. Being rooted in such a solid foundation was key when Larson was forced to make difficult choices later on.

Although it may not have been the easiest path, Larson was always confident in his ability to rise out of life’s challenges. “There was the occasional reality check, those times grilling burgers with a jerk for a boss, or loading trucks late at night, which would motivate me,” he said. “I always knew I would do more than those jobs, and those tough realities are just the thing to motivate a person to move on.”

There seems to be something intrinsically laced in Larson’s character that drives him to success and is fueled by a love for learning—something beyond motivation and the often shallow push from parents to succeed, which Larson lacked anyway in his formative years. Looking at his background on paper, I’d expect to find Larson, at worst, drug-addicted and alone. At best, still cooking fast food and struggling to make ends meet. But seeing the challenges he’s faced as opportunities, Larson doesn’t see that there were any other options: he had to succeed.

In his own California-roots fashion, Joseph Larson takes time to absorb and study the world around him. He has an appreciation for those who have chosen to live life differently, and he values the family and life he now has. He's been given the opportunity to decide what he wanted to do and who he wanted to be, and so he invites others to do the same.

“What motivates us ultimately to do what we do, to me, is still a big mystery,” he said.

This speaks to Larson's enigmatic self as well. *He had every opportunity to fail*, was the thought that pervasively and dogmatically prodded at my mind. And yet, with tenacity that is difficult to fathom, he picked up the pieces his family left behind and, without a blink, proved he had every tool to succeed.

When the necktie comes off, it drags with it all stereotypical assumptions we might have conjured about this metropolitan man. It's anyone's game as to what Larson is up to once he steps out of lawyer mode (although, if it's trivia or crossword puzzles, I've been warned not to challenge him). Often, he's tending to the various animals for which he couldn't refuse a place in his home. He's watching the Washington Nationals game over dinner. He's putting that suit and tie back on for a night at The Shakespeare Theatre in DC. He's listening to everything from Native American flute music to Neil Young. Or, he is—after multiple hip replacements on both sides—running and training for his next marathon.

Amid the surprises and the proved-everyone-wrongs, perhaps only three things are certain about Joseph Larson: his love of learning, his love of life, and that double shot espresso.

## REVIEW

### **“Zero Dark Thirty” torture left behind the screens**

I never planned on seeing *Zero Dark Thirty*. And I was dead-set on that decision. I have cringed while watching America's Funniest Home Videos because people fall and hurt themselves; I nearly had a panic attack in high school gym class when I witnessed a classmate snap both of his wrists; sometimes the gore depicted in movies drives me to nausea. So when *Zero Dark Thirty*—a film about terrorism, torture, and the manhunt for Osama Bin Laden—hit theaters, I didn't consider myself to be the intended viewer. I envisioned graphic brutality, blood, and no mercy (on the victims, or on me in the audience).

But peer pressure swooped in upon me when my two friends told me that they adamantly wanted to see the new war-thriller. I did too, I should mention, but I just didn't think I could handle it. For the next few days, my mission became furiously scouring the Internet for some indication as to what I would be getting myself into. I left no website or blog untouched as I plugged “How violent is *Zero Dark Thirty*” into various search engines.

What I found churned my stomach.

I can summarize my research easily: The entire first hour of the movie is gruesome. The audience is forced to watch the CIA torture victims. The hostages are tortured physically, emotionally, and sexually. Even after you've made it past the first hour, the last half-hour to forty-five minutes is filled with gore and relentless violence. The director, Kathryn Bigelow, glorifies torture. This movie is pro-war and pro-torture. I wanted to walk out of the theater. How dare Kathryn Bigelow make such heinous torture a part of a major motion picture.

Given these testaments, I expected the worst. I battled with myself over seeing the movie, and ninety-nine percent of the time I convinced myself that it was a bad idea. On the way to the movie theater, I experienced fight-or-flight response. But I thought it historically and politically exigent that I see *Zero Dark Thirty*. So I did.

And I'm here to say that Kathryn Bigelow got the short end of the stick.

My friends may read this and laugh. They likely remember the hand I kept over my eye for at least the first half of the movie, stretching my fingers apart for me to watch the film, but keeping them close enough so that if something gruesome flashed across the screen, I could quickly and almost effortlessly shield my eyes. "Did she even see the movie?" they probably wondered.

Yes, friends, I did see the movie. Despite my wallowing and anticipating the images of my nightmares being brought to life on screen, I did watch the film. Because those nightmarish images I had conjured never came.

Based on my research, I anticipated bones breaking. Flesh tearing. Blood, guts, and everything in between. Utter ruthlessness. And I'm not saying that what I got wasn't hard to watch, or disturbing—because it was both of those things—but what no one failed to mention in the commentaries I read was that, for what the movie was, the violence and torture was actually relatively tasteful.

The movie starts out with a dark screen. You hear panicked voices calling 911, explaining that their plane has been hijacked. A small clustering of voices then turns into the chaotic audio of many frantic 911 calls. And most memorably, you hear the distraught voice of a heavy-breathing woman saying, "It's so hot. It's so hot. I'm going to die. I'm going to die, aren't I?" "You're going to be fine," a woman assures her on the other end of the line. "Just stay calm."

Time then flashes forward to a black site in Pakistan, where a man accused of being linked to the September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers is detained. He is sleep deprived and has a black eye, among other bruises and cuts on his face. CIA personnel, including our main character, Maya, enter the room to interrogate him. Prying for information, one officer first asks the detainee for information without physical contact. He offers him liquefied

food contained in a plastic water bottle, and the prisoner gulps it down with fervor. But after the detainee offers up no information, the officer tells him that he'll have to use force.

This process extends for a few days. We see the officer knock a chair out from underneath the detainee and string him up by his arms. The officer screams at him. When he gets no response, the prisoner is water boarded. He cries, chokes, and screams, but still offers no information. He is kept awake for long stretches of time and becomes delirious. Later on, he is forced into a small, coffin-like box where he sleeps. He is strung up by his arms again and the officer pulls down his pants, revealing the detainee's genitals to Maya, who cringes in the corner and averts her eyes. Still naked, the officer puts a collar around the prisoner's neck and walks him out of the room like a dog on a leash.

That's about as bad as it gets. And by no means does that mean it *wasn't* bad. In fact, you could hear the painfully silent discomfort in the theater audience as the images of newspaper headlines and war coverage played out realistically in front of them. But the actual violence and gore of it all was primarily left up to assumption. Unfortunately, I've been exposed to more brutality in a PG-13 horror film. We all knew that the torture that happened in the mission leading up to Osama bin Laden's death was far worse than what we were seeing in the theater. But in knowing that, I believe Kathryn Bigelow gave us what we could visually handle, and let our minds envision the rest. As Bigelow put it when she came under fire for directing a pro-torture film, "depiction is not endorsement." And I was left feeling as though those who consider this historical-fiction movie to be pro-torture should take up their cases with U.S. policymakers, not a film director.

Because here's what I saw: Maya, who appeared to be disturbed by the torture she witnessed from her colleague; Maya, speaking relatively calmly to detainees during interrogations; Maya, who often gets false information from prisoners through torture techniques, simply because they want the violence to cease; and Maya, seemingly getting more of her intelligence analysis during the latter half of the film when the torture had been reduced.

The rest of the film shows us this legwork—the meetings, the analysis, the hours of interrogation films that Maya had to watch in order to draw connections, the frustration when no one believed in her instincts, and then, finally, the attack on Osama bin Laden's compound. Two helicopters full of soldiers descend upon the fortress at night and methodically station themselves in position. They blast open each door and keep wary of any movement within the house. Men and women who try to interfere are shot dead. Finally, a shot is fired at a man we can't see—and when the soldiers enter the room, audiences get a vague image of a new corpse that looks ambiguously like Osama bin Laden. The soldiers gather up as much computer data as possible, then make their way out. Osama bin Laden's body is shown to Maya for body identification, she boards a private military plane, sheds a few tears, and the credits roll. No victory, no heroism, no fanfare.

And at first I thought, “Where’s the part where she gets to go home and say she caught bin Laden? What about Americans’ reactions to the mission? What happened then? Give me more.”

But that’s not what the film was about, was it? It was not pro-war or pro-terrorism, or even pro-America-look-who-we-killed.

Instead, the film was about a determined CIA analyst (or analysts, because classification prevents us from knowing who was involved) who was willing to tirelessly put the pieces together, follow her instinct, and seek out the needle in the haystack. An agent who threw herself into danger and did a job that none of us watching this movie could fathom. That was victory, heroism, and fanfare in and of itself.

Well done, Kathryn Bigelow. Thanks for keeping me in check.

#### COMMENTARY (OP-ED)

##### **What happens when we move too quickly to read slowly?**

*Digital literacy and deep reading are not the same, but one might be losing ground.*

It’s nothing new for Generation Y-ers, but it’s everywhere.

Did you watch the State of the Union last night? No, but I read all the live tweets on my feed and scrolled through the recap articles. Have you read that book due for our paper next week? I skimmed through it, plus I’ve seen the movie so that counts for something. What kind of books do you like to read? I spend all day reading things on my computer, I don’t have time to read books in my spare time.

My fears about these types of interactions with reading were recently confirmed in the Washington Post under the headline, “Serious reading takes a hit from online scanning and skimming, researchers say.” Attempting to navigate information overload, we give an article a few seconds at most before we restlessly scroll down further or give up altogether and click on the next headline that grabs our attention. Comprehension, researchers reported, seems to be better with print. And, further, this skim-scan method seems to be catching on in the way we read material off-screen. We may be at the precipice of reading paper materials with the same eye-scanning, finger-scrolling-type technique we do with online ones, which could also “stunt the development of deep reading skills.”

Amid sound-byte culture and social media speed, we’ve taken our culture from the public sphere to the public screen. Which is all in good fun until we lose one essential skill: reading deeply—slowly, comprehensively, and critically—in order to be intellectually stimulated at high levels and engaged with our learning.



When I reflect on my education so far, I ask myself when my mind was most hungry, most objective, most conducive to learning. The response I've produced is a two-part answer—first, when I was a young elementary school student, and, second, now as a college student. I'm sure that this gap in eagerness to learn is at least partially due to the preoccupations of growing up and the myriad distractions it brings in tow. But, if I ignore that and narrow in on one common factor between all of those gap years, I'm looking at a near absence of critical reading and writing.

In elementary school we had free reading time, free writing time, and opportunities to create original work and thoughts. And from a young age, books became not an escape, but a portal through which I could understand lives different from mine, experience historic periods long gone, and open myself up wholly to perspectives from worlds unknown to me. In reading books, my mind has been exercised, it has swelled with perspective, and it has engaged in combat with itself in order to strengthen.

But in my earlier teen years and during the dramatic crescendo of social media, I only read school-assigned pieces and the constant flow of shorthand emails, Facebook comments, and tweets that filled my life. Along with my diminished reading and writing skills, I lost my ability to think.

There were exceptions, of course—my advanced placement English courses in high school being the most vivid examples. But, I don't think it was until college that I once again felt agency and depth playing a large role in my education. I retrieved the curiosity I'd dropped somewhere in my middle school hallways and began to learn through critical reading and writing once more. I experienced a sense of revival when I started reading—deeply—again.

A disclaimer is necessary here: my goal is not to lambast Millennials and our compliance with 21st century technology and social media. There are plenty of things we do well—better, even, than generations that precede us—plus, social media isn't a bad thing. (And, for the record, tons of older adults read this way too.) But, given the ways in which this type of literacy has infiltrated our education, and will continue to do so, I caution against the fact that many of us have developed newer, more “21st century skills” at the expense of—dare I say—“old” ones.

Our ability to absorb and produce meaning through the written word is not just important for our personal lives; it's vital to the society we live in. Learning through both means is the key to mastering content, and the more we do it the more we are learning about the world we inhabit.

In his New York Times opinion piece, “Faking Cultural Literacy,” Karl Taro Greenfeld cautions us against this superficial and high-volume data input that we're calling literacy. “According to a recent survey by the American Press Institute, nearly six in 10 Americans acknowledge that they do nothing more than read news headlines—and I know this only because I skimmed a Washington Post headline about the survey,” Greenfeld chides.

Compounding this is data from a Pew Research Center report, which cites that 24 percent—nearly one fourth—of our nation’s adults had not read a single book in 2013.

As a result, we’re often absorbing minutiae amid big-picture problems, then recycling the regurgitated content before we’ve even processed what it means. But when the exigencies of the world we live in require live-tweeting, immediate posting, and the instantaneous formation of opinions and responses, it’s easier to submit ourselves to the skim-post-repeat blueprint than fall behind the social curve if we actually take the time to read a book.

But will we really know much of anything? Be equipped to develop robust opinions and work through enigmatic concepts?

But I do balk at the thought of individuals asserting knowledge about the presidential campaign process without considering reading Theodore White’s *The Making of the President: 1960* in its entirety; of commenting on current national affairs while also rejecting the idea of picking up George Packer’s *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*; of engaging in meaningless discourse about important subjects because they didn’t make it through the whole article.

This doesn’t mean you’re useless if you haven’t read a library full of books on a given subject. But it does mean that the contexts behind big-picture issues weren’t cultivated in isolated instances, so our understanding of them can’t be gleaned from mere headlines or 140-character blips either.

As the Washington Post article suggested, our habits with sporadic digital literacy may be making our print reading nonlinear, too. “We’re spending so much time touching, pushing, linking, scrolling and jumping through text that when we sit down with a novel, your daily habits of jumping, clicking, linking is just ingrained in you,” said Andrew Dillon, a University of Texas professor cited in the article. “We’re in this new era of information behavior, and we’re beginning to see the consequences of that.”

My suggested remedy is not one of elimination or drastic denouncement of digital content. I’m not averse to change, nor do I have a phobia of adapting to 21st century technology—I do my fair share of social networking, online news reading, link-clicking then tab-closing, and, for the most part, I do enjoy the visual and digital culture we’re living in.

What I propose, rather, is restoring a sense of balance, where we recognize that we can’t survive on digital reading alone. There’s a time and place for scroll-scan reading—but not at the expense of depth, critical thinking, and comprehension.

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*CHAPTER 3*

**SPEECHWRITING**

## SECTION 1: Speechwriting Research

The power of speechwriting is interwoven into the world's brightest and darkest moments in history. During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood up to enliven his people, assuring them that there was "nothing to fear but fear itself." Several decades later, Richard Nixon—a politician who'd been under fire for corruption—recovered his career with a single speech and soldiered on to become the President of the United States. During his second term of serving the country, he addressed the American people once more, this time as he resigned with a tarnished reputation. Slightly more recently, professional basketball player Magic Johnson shared with the public that he had tested positive for HIV, hoping to rally his fans in the battle against AIDS.

Sarah Trenholm's (2008) *Thinking Through Communication: An Introduction to the Study of Human Communication* provides these examples of "how single individuals, communicating in the public sphere, can use the spoken word to influence audiences and sway public opinion" (p. 234). Rhetoric, she adds, "does not belong only to the famous; every day, all over the country, average people stand up and speak to audiences and, in doing so, make a difference" (p. 235). The ability to write speeches well is therefore a remarkably important task—and also an incredibly difficult one.

When an effective speech takes place, there is something that occurs in the audience that marks its success. Individuals who had previously been distracted begin to shift in their seats, straighten their spines, lean in. Their ears and eyes seem to widen, as if to expand their senses more fully to the speaker, becoming more present, magnifying the content of the speech, and committing it to memory. Their gaze focuses intently on the speaker and is only broken between quick blinks. The room's energy, at first, is pushed forward toward the speaker, then is radiated throughout each corner of the room as audience members share in the excitement and energy of the speech together.

These are the marks of a speech that is bigger than the speaker, the words, and the occasion. It is a speech that ignites flickers of transformation within audience members, and so it galvanizes change for its exigency.

There is an additional element of speeches versus written text that, of course, resides in the orator. While we should always aim to create relationships between writers and those who will be reading what we put down on paper, there is an aural and visual

component to speeches that can't quite be matched despite our best literary attempts. There are dynamics of eye contact, scene, tangible energy, intonation, and other nonverbal components that reduce the rhetorical distance between the speaker and his or her audience, and so they enter into a more intimate bond in their roles as message creators and receivers. Even if a speech isn't viewed live, there are still nonverbal cues we pick up from the speaker that guide our interpretation of the text.

We give speeches for these reasons. There are many occasions in which a written document does not suffice—the situation calls for the words to be brought off a page, to resonate through the walls of a ballroom or into the microphone at a press gathering; for the audience to maximize their senses and allow the speaker's message to seep into every fibre of their knowledge and identity; for a human to stand with an identity behind the words and forge a stronger connection with their audience. And so we begin with the written word, then allow the powers of speech to takeover.

The challenge for writers, however, comes with the knowledge that writing for the spoken word is an entirely different undertaking from writing for print. Combining aural and visual components with text creates a combination of stimuli that requires considerations unlike the ones we pay attention to when writing essays, articles, and books. Perhaps two main things separate speechwriting as a style from other forms of composition: (1) it involves the speaker and writer as two separate individuals, and (2) speechwriting entails “language that is heard and not seen.”

### **Split identity: Speaker, writer**

Unless a perfect blend of occasion, availability, and scheduling occurs where a person is asked to give a speech that they also plan to write themselves, speechwriting often involves the speaker and the writer as two separate individuals. At one end of a speech's creation is the politician, CEO, award winner, graduation commencement speaker, or other leader who will be delivering the address; on the other is the writer who is tasked with crafting the speech's message. Ghostwriting speeches therefore requires writers to capture the essence of speakers who are not themselves.

What can cut writers deepest when crafting speeches is the unusual task of relinquishing our author's voice to accommodate someone else's. Even in other

circumstances where we're required to make our tone neutral, academic, concise, or formulaic, we are still writing in a style that is essentially a modified version of our own. But with ghostwriting speeches, we must substitute phrases that we might have used ourselves for ones that our speaker prefers; we create syntax that might seem unnatural to us, but that rolls off our client's tongue with ease; we discuss with facility policies, fiscal reports, and technology that normally seem foreign to us; and we do it all with the purpose of sounding like someone else. While potentially uncomfortable and unnatural to grasp at first, it is a challenge that speechwriters must attack head-on, and sooner rather than later, if they hope to be successful.

Christopher Buckley, former speechwriter for George H. W. Bush, has said that "the trick of speechwriting...is making the client say your brilliant words while somehow managing to make it sound as though they issued straight from their own soul" (quoted in Parker, 2008). Speechwriters are hired for their expertise in the written word, but even beyond the challenge of writing clear, effective, eloquent speeches is the difficult task of adapting the writing from speaker to speaker. If we're lucky, we may serve as a permanent speechwriter for a client whose style and identity we get to know well over time, or perhaps have known for quite a while, and the style of the speeches we write will afford some consistency. If we're freelancing, on the other hand, we aren't awarded that luxury. Each individual speech must be as unique as the speakers who will be presenting them. "Imagine putting the words 'Ask not what your country can do for you' into the mouth of Ron Paul, and you can see the problem," said Buckley (quoted in Parker, 2008).

When Cody Keenan, a speechwriter for President Obama, first joined the Obama campaign, he began to master his new boss's voice by listening to audio versions of Obama's books on his long car ride to Chicago and staying up all night to watch some of the senator's speeches online. "It's only by virtue of watching him deliver speeches, getting his edits and seeing how he thinks, and listening to him speak when you're talking to him" (Kohut, 2013), Keenan says. "Eventually, you start to hear it in your own head while you're writing. It just takes time, like anything else." Ideally, a speechwriter must establish a mutual dependency between themselves and their client. Obama's chief campaign strategist, David Axelrod, commented in an article titled "What Would Obama Say?" (Parker, 2008) that Barack Obama trusted Jon Favreau, who served on his



speechwriting team, and “Barack doesn’t trust too many folks with that—the notion of surrendering that much authority over his own words.” And, perhaps, rightfully so. President Obama is not only a politician who is well-known for his chops as a rhetorician, but he has also written best-selling books and given the highly praised keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Favreau described his job, simply, as akin to being “Ted Williams’s batting coach.”

In her address on how to write effective speeches, Cynthia Starks (2010) outlines ten steps necessary for speechwriting success, the sixth being “write to the speaker’s voice” (p. 155). Spending time with a speaker to “learn what expressions she uses, [if] he makes jokes or tell[s] stories,” or even what phrases he or she likes adds the speaker’s personality and an element of authenticity to the speech. Behind the scenes, speeches are very much a synergetic effort.

Kristine Bruss’s (2011) research on “Ghosting Authenticity” features an interview with speechwriter Alan Perlman, who wrote speeches for executives in General Motors and Kraft foods in the 1980s and 90s. Perlman shared three levels of consideration that speechwriters must follow in order to remain faithful to the individual speaker’s voice: (1) verbal style, (2) rhetorical techniques, and (3) intellectual character.

On verbal style, Perlman said:

Most stylisticians acknowledge that somehow you’ve got to replicate the speaker’s syntax. However you can, make it sound like him or her. I’m talking in terms of really simple things like short sentences, long sentences, whatever. When you’re a linguist you can actually identify sentence types, sentence patterns. And you can go further; I have a very elaborate stylistic profiling process in which I identify vocabulary items and levels of vocabulary, so if he says this word, not only does he use this word but uses equally sophisticated words. (p. 168)

One challenge in replicating an accurate voice for a speaker, however, is that ultimately they may not like how they truly sound. In fact, staying true to a speaker’s voice does not always involve imitation—instead, it may require representation. As Duffy and Winchell (1989) share, ghostwriters “must find a ‘voice’ which, though not precisely the voice with which the client ordinarily speaks, captures the essence of the person and creates the image the speaker intends” (cited in Bruss, 2011, p. 160). When leaders speak publicly, they are most often embodying a persona that is not necessarily

their “true” self, but a specific version of themselves that they wish to present. As speechwriters, we have to recognize what this persona is and how we can ensure that this “character” and the true voice of our client join forces.

On rhetorical techniques, which refer to the ways in which our clients prefer to make points, Perlman said:

How does he or she like to prove things and explain things? Tell jokes? Give facts? Amazing facts? Historical references? Stories with anecdotes? Whatever it is—maybe it’s a mix of all three, or something I haven’t discovered yet. The categories are open-ended. You’ve got to figure out what that person’s most comfortable way to get a point across is. Don’t give them an argument they couldn’t possibly make or drop in quotes they couldn’t possibly have read. (p. 169-170)

If the purpose of a speech is to be informative and persuasive, then part of writing a speech that seems natural and fluid is, of course, determining the ways in which the speaker most naturally and fluidly informs and persuades. An essential component of maintaining the author’s sense of self is in preserving what comes easily to them rhetorically. While as a writer you may have a better idea for a persuasive strategy, it may sacrifice the speaker’s authenticity if it seems tense or feigned.

Finally, on intellectual character Perlman said:

Somehow you have got to figure out what this person knows, and beyond business, if anything. And then bring in additional knowledge at that level, whatever it is. You can use a quote from a movie the speaker has probably seen, you can use quotes from any business publications—he’s probably read them. You must be honest intellectually as well as rhetorically and stylistically. (p. 172)

Alan Perlman’s tactics reminded Bruss (2011) of the ancient practice of *ethopoeia*, which means “character making” and combines the Greek word *ethos*, “character,” with *poiein*, “to make” (p. 160). Fused together, these two concepts are brought to life in Perlman’s attention to verbal style, rhetorical techniques, and intellectual character, where *ethopoeia* is a “multidimensional activity involving the assessment and representation of ideas and words that are well suited to the character of a given speaker” (Bruss, 2011, p. 161). It is somewhat theatrical in nature, creating a persona for the speaker that is both “lively and faithful” (p. 163).

In order to master this character making, speeches often share their identity with audiences by selecting certain facts they wish to share and taking advantage of the power of narrative. Sometimes this construction of identity is overt, while other times it is more subtle: it could be due to the visual aspects of the speech, but it also lies in the words of the speaker, where “certain elements may *sneak* in that help to create a certain image” (van de Mierop, 2006, p. 148). Storytelling is one aspect of speechwriting that can be most effective when done well—it assists building the speaker’s identity, it draws connections between the anecdote and the main point of the speech, and it can make the speech more relatable and interesting to the audience.

Despite the fact that we narrate things constantly as writers, it is often much harder to make stories fit the framework of spoken rhetoric. There tend to be more constraints with speeches, where the audience may be hostile or visually distracted, and unlike a piece of written text, if listeners tune out for even a second or two there is no opportunity to go back and have the speaker reiterate what they missed. As such, the stories we tell in speeches cannot be too long or complex, or they will fall flat and be counterproductive.

Instead of thinking of this tactic as “storytelling,” it is perhaps more beneficial for speechwriters to think of them as what Steven Cohen (2011) calls creating “moments.” A moment is:

...a snapshot in time that invites listeners to experience a particular situation. Think of a “moment” as a single photograph within a frame. When speakers verbally recreate a particular photograph, they should describe only what they “see” in the still image in their mind. Although speakers may be tempted to wander outside the periphery, they must stay within the frame at all times. (p. 198)

Once speechwriters pinpoint these moments, they can begin to paint their anecdotes around this focal point by focusing on the setting, the characters, the plot, and the moral (Cohen, 2011, p. 198). Setting, firstly, should actively transmit listeners to a specific place or time, describing the most important and vivid aspects of the scene. If it was winter, and that is important to the moral, the speaker should describe the chill and the numbness of his or her hands as she waited at the train station. If the “moment” took place on a farm, they should share the dust on their boots and the strong smell of fertilizer

that drew into their nostrils with the wind. Next, the characters (or actors) in the scene should come to life. In speeches, however, the number of characters described should be limited to only one or two, if possible, so as to allow the audience to know them at greater depth without becoming confused, distracted, or bored. Third, Cohen (2011) advises speechwriters that when writing a plot for a speech, there should be an emphasis on “‘inflection points’ as critical, defining moments” (p. 200) that have larger implications. Honing in on these points keeps speech anecdotes concise and focused rather than long and drawn-out. Finally, the moral should be stated explicitly. The audience should not have to guess what the takeaway from the anecdote was—the speaker should make the connection immediately and clearly so that listeners won’t be left wondering why the anecdote was shared in the first place.

The coalition of all these forces—the dynamic of the speechwriter capturing the identity of the speaker, representing their verbal style, rhetorical techniques, and intellectual character, and creating narratives that fit the speaker and also excite the audience—are the result of great speechwriters doing their homework. Just like with any other genre, we are not only writers, we are researchers. Storytellers, but also analysts and investigators. Our goal in ghostwriting is to write words that sound as though they came straight from our client, and in order to do this we must attempt to get on their level of expertise on the subject despite the legwork required to do so. If not, we jeopardize the goal of making the speechwriter and the speaker’s voice being united.

This concept of a split identity fusing together into one often spawns skepticism among those who are suspicious about the concept of ghostwriters. It can call into question fundamentals of ethics, like, “Can that speaker really claim to be who they say they are, know what they know, and speak how they do if someone else has written a speech for them?” For some, ghostwriting appears to violate one of the most fundamental components of persuasion—ethos, the speaker’s character and credibility.

Speaking about corporate speechwriting, Seeger (1992) shares that “some traditional critics have argued...that employing a ghostwriter represents a kind of audience deception akin to plagiarism,” while “others have suggested that the use of a ghostwriter is simply a pragmatic accommodation to the busy schedules and complex issues corporate executives must address” (p. 501). Fundamentally, speechwriting comes

down to summing up a client's thoughts in a way that makes sense and is effective. They aren't designed to scam audiences—in fact, audiences are part of the process too, and if they feel as though something about the speech is off and that the speaker isn't credible, the entire persuasive effort is negligible anyway. Instead, Seeger (1992) compares ghostwriting to a corporate executive hiring an accountant or contracting an engineer to complete skill-specific work. There can, of course, reach a point where information is flat-out falsified, but Seeger suggests that in determining the ethics behind a speech “it is necessary to examine the degree to which the speech is a product of the speaker,” (p. 502). And, in most cases, due to the symbiosis needed to create an effective speech in the first place, the process is largely collaborative and genuine.

Cody Keenan, an Obama speechwriter, explained the amount of involvement the President has with his speeches. The President will unload his initial ideas for the speech while Keenan jots them down on his computer at lightning speed, and he will later mark up drafts with edits after Keenan has written material. Keenan joked that, in many ways, speechwriting for a boss is like handing papers in to a schoolteacher. If you get it back with pen all over it, it's not what they wanted and you've failed to capture the message they were hoping to create. “That is never good,” Keenan said (Kohut, 2013, p. 22). He added:

For a speechwriter tasked with giving voice to the president's thoughts, a love of anonymity is almost a job requirement. “The truth is that everything that comes out of the president's mouth is eventually his...Our job is to sit down and write what the president would write if he had unlimited time to do it. It's not to get our own viewpoint across or make our own arguments. If he wasn't busy running the country, if he could sit down for a couple of days, what would he write?” (p. 22)

Speechwriters and their speakers must understand their separate, but collaborative, roles in the process. The speaker is the figurehead, the person who decides on main points and the speech's overall message, and who ultimately has the last say in what is included in the speech. The speechwriter is the artist who stands behind the speaker, crafting the sentences to fill in the main points and making it sound effortless. With these roles understood, the speech's content is heightened and audiences are eventually more persuaded.

### **Language that is heard, not seen**

If you've ever read the full-text transcript of a good speech, you likely noticed almost immediately that something about the way it read was off. Sentences are shorter, they seem almost too informal, a conversational style is employed rather than a refined one. We have expectations lined up that good speeches are eloquent, artistically crafted, poetic, and narrative. But when we see them on a page it can be jarring to witness a style that is virtually unrecognizable in most other writing for print.

This contrast is explained by Elinor Donohue (1995), who reminds us that “text is absorbed through the eye; spoken words, of course, through the ear. The style, phrasing, and rhetoric of spoken language are different from written” (p. 670). She explains, there is “no opportunity to go back and reread—or to press the remote for an instant replay.” The spoken word requires aural aesthetics, snappiness, and repetition, repetition, repetition. It must excite the senses, be clear enough for audience members to remember without having read it with their own eyes, and the sentences must be short enough that listeners are lost along the way. Donahue best describes speeches as a conversation. They contain the “flavor of conversational speech—without the uhs, the ahs, the incomplete thoughts, [and] the extremes of slang we use every day” (p. 670). Put even more simply, “If a speech were a style of dress, it would be somewhere between a tuxedo and a flannel shirt. Not stiff. But not sloppy” (p. 670).

So, how do speechwriters “dress” their speakers for success? Most importantly, writers must change their fashion to not only accommodate the voice of their speaker, but also adopt a style that is meant to be spoken rather than read. For writers who are used to crafting essays, articles, and memoirs, this can be an uncomfortable task—one that seems to reverse the rules we've adopted and simplify a style that we've been honing in our time as writers. However, making a speech more conversational does not mean dumbing it down. In fact, finding the perfect blend between language that is casual and language that is sophisticated is a remarkably artful task that requires both talent and experience.

Michael Witkoski (2002) shares that “While speechwriting assignments have never been so plentiful, they have seldom been so difficult” (p. 15). Among the reasons are: “multiple audiences demand different styles and approaches; complex topics include increasingly arcane technical, financial and legal issues; [and] there is heightened

attention on speeches from a variety of observers including the traditional media and their more elusive and diffuse kin on the Web” (p. 15).

There also seems to be a strong desire among writers, Witkoski explains, to achieve a certain level of eloquence. For some reason, speechwriters can fall victim to believing that they have to match the rhetorical levels of Martin Luther King Jr., Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, or else our speech will fail. We try to replicate “I have a dream,” “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” and “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” and, in the process, mismatch the occasion and the rhetoric, put words into our speakers’ mouths that don’t fit, and craft words that seem overwritten.

Consider Witkoski’s perspective:

Speeches do a number of different things and many, probably most, of them simply don’t need misconceived or misapplied eloquence. The majority of speech occasions call for little, if any, self-conscious rhetoric. In most cases, a speech whose language draws primary attention to itself interferes with the audience’s reception, understanding and enjoyment of that speech’s content. For most speeches, something’s wrong when the container draws more attention than the content. (p. 15)

When it comes down to it, audience members have to walk away from a speech remembering the facts, the call to action, and the overall purpose. If all they recall is that the speech was eloquent, the speech has still failed. Change won’t be made from eloquence without content, and it certainly won’t be made if listeners can’t pinpoint the speech’s purpose two hours, two weeks, or two months after the occasion. There is a different kind of “eloquence” that can be achieved in speeches—what Witkoski calls “eloquence of momentum”—that comes in the “quick, hammer-stroke rhythm of the bulleted list.” Listeners will more readily absorb facts, anecdotes, and simplicity than they will be able to recite the poetry that a speaker may have been spewing aimlessly.

None of this is to say, however, that achieving eloquence is never a good thing. Instead, it is just a cautionary measure to assure that speechwriters don’t get lost in focusing on language rather than clarity. Eloquence in speeches derives from pacing, narration, energy, and repetition without redundancy. It’s language that makes the speaker sound like they’re naturally engaging in dialogue with the audience, but at a level that resides above that of “normal” conversationalists.

It is this paradox—of countless hours and teams of behind-the-scene experts, whose goal is to ultimately make the final product seem effortless—that defines the art of speechwriting. In the joining of these forces, of speechwriter with speaker, and of hard work with eventual ease, “the shift” occurs: audience members sit up straighter, lean inward, and widen their ears, and the transformation charges the audience and the speaker with energy that creates an effect much bigger than the speech act itself.

## SECTION 2: Speechwriting Analysis

Author’s Note: Given the amount of time spent discussing the act of ghostwriting, of a “split identity,” in the previous section, it may seem confusing that what follows is an analysis of a speech that was written by its deliverer. However, circumstances required that the creative piece that appears in Section 3 of this chapter be written and delivered by a single person, so Barack Obama’s self-written Democratic National Convention speech below offers a cleaner transition.

### **Keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention**

*Barack Obama, July 27, 2004* (The below transcript has been formatted by the author)

Full transcript was obtained from *The Washington Post’s* website at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html>.

Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Thank you, Dick Durbin. You make us all proud. On behalf of the great state of Illinois... crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention. Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely.

My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin- roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that's shown as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before him. While studying here my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor, my grandfather signed up for duty, joined Patton's army, marched across Europe. Back home my grandmother raised a baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the GI Bill, bought a house through FHA and later moved west, all the way to Hawaii, in search of opportunity. And they too had big dreams for their daughter, a common dream born of two continents.



My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential. They're both passed away now. And yet I know that, on this night, they look down on me with great pride. And I stand here today grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my two precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy; our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." That is the true genius of America, a faith...a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles; that we can tuck in our children at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm; that we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door; that we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe; that we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution; and that our votes will be counted -- or at least, most of the time.

This year, in this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and our commitments, to hold them against a hard reality and see how we are measuring up, to the legacy of our forbearers and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans, Democrats, Republicans, independents, I say to you, tonight, we have more work to do...more work to do, for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now they're having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay 7 bucks an hour; more to do for the father I met who was losing his job and choking back the tears wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a months for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits that he counted on; more to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her who have the grades, have the drive, have the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.

Now, don't get me wrong, the people I meet in small towns and big cities and diners and office parks, they don't expect government to solves all of their problems. They know they have to work hard to get ahead. And they want to. Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you: They don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or by the Pentagon. Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to teach, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate

the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white. They know those things. People don't expect -- people don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They know we can do better. And they want that choice.

In this election, we offer that choice. Our party has chosen a man to lead us who embodies the best this country has to offer. And that man is John Kerry. John Kerry understands the ideals of community, faith and service because they've defined his life. From his heroic service to Vietnam to his years as prosecutor and lieutenant governor, through two decades in the United States Senate, he has devoted himself to this country. Again and again, we've seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available. His values and his record affirm what is best in us.

John Kerry believes in an America where hard work is rewarded. So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas, he offers them to companies creating jobs here at home. John Kerry believes in an America where all Americans can afford the same health coverage our politicians in Washington have for themselves. John Kerry believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies or the sabotage of foreign oil fields. John Kerry believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world, and he will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us. And John Kerry believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option sometimes, but it should never be the first option.

You know, a while back, I met a young man named Seamus (ph) in a VFW hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-looking kid, 6'2", 6'3", clear eyed, with an easy smile. He told me he'd joined the Marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. And as I listened to him explain why he had enlisted -- the absolute faith he had in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service -- I thought, this young man was all that any of us might ever hope for in a child. But then I asked myself: Are we serving Seamus (ph) as well as he's serving us?

I thought of the 900 men and women, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors who won't be returning to their own hometowns. I thought of the families I had met who were struggling to get by without a loved one's full income or whose loved ones had returned with a limb missing or nerves shattered, but still lacked long-term health benefits because they were Reservists. When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they are going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return and to never, ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace and earn the respect of the world.

Now, let me be clear. Let me be clear. We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued. And they must be defeated. John Kerry knows this. And just as Lieutenant Kerry did not hesitate to risk his life to protect the men who served with him in Vietnam, President Kerry will not hesitate one moment to use our military might to keep America safe and secure. John Kerry believes in America. And he knows that it's not enough for just some of us to prosper. For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga, a belief that we are all connected as one people.

If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for their prescription and having to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandparent. If there's an Arab-American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

It is that fundamental belief—it is that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sisters' keeper—that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family: "E pluribus unum," out of many, one. Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America.

The pundits, the pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue States: red states for Republicans, blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America. In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism, or do we participate in a politics of hope?

John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here, the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't think about it, or health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. That's not what I'm talking. I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.

Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation, a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.

I believe that we can give our middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs for the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs, and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices and meet the challenges that face us.

America, tonight, if you feel the same energy that I do, if you feel the same urgency that I do, if you feel the same passion that I do, if you feel the same hopefulness that I do, if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine, the people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as president. And John Edwards will be sworn in as vice president. And this country will reclaim its promise. And out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. Thank you.

END

When Barack Obama delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, he was merely an Illinois state senator and a candidate for the U.S. Senate in Illinois, virtually unknown on a national scale. The opportunity to deliver this keynote address, however, catapulted Obama into national recognition. In video footage of the speech, the audience can be heard in roaring agreement throughout, even chanting “Obama” as the speech went on. In only a roughly 17-minute speech, Barack Obama was interrupted 33 times by the audience’s applause. Politicians and reporters commented on his delivery and charisma, and a buzz of presidential potential hummed around Obama’s name. The speech has been called a star-maker, an introduction to Obama as a politician with national influence, and the “first” speech in Obama’s presidential “campaign.”

According to *Chicago* magazine, “Before the speech, the idea of Obama running for president in 2008 would have been laughable; he was a lowly state senator from Chicago’s Hyde Park, and while he stood a good chance at winning his U.S. Senate race, he would enter that powerful body ranked 99th out of 100 in seniority” (Bernstein, 2007). In 2004, he was a rookie, but once he delivered the keynote address at the 2004

Democratic National Convention at the end of July that year, his remarks proved the power of speech—he was soon a household name being ranked among some of history’s beloved rhetoricians. “After the speech, observers from across the political world hailed the address as an instant classic, and Obama was drawing comparisons (deservedly or not) to Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy” (Bernstein, 2007), according to *Chicago* magazine.

This speech succeeded in creating the type of environment I described earlier: one in which spines straightened, ears and eyes widened, and the room’s energy radiated throughout each corner of the venue. It marked something bigger than the speaker, the words, and the occasion. It grabbed the audience’s attention with a captivating grip, and, given Obama’s eventual election as President of the United States of America, galvanized action and change. It was an occasion that would not have sufficed in written document form; it demanded to be spoken and performed and Obama did so in such a way that seemed to sparkle and gave listeners a chill. Looking back on this keynote address, many have referred to it as the reason Barack Obama was elected as President in 2008. Including each essential characteristic to speechwriting discussed in section one of this chapter, Obama’s now-famous keynote address proves the importance of capturing a speaker’s identity and writing for the ear, not the eye.

This address is not the best example of the “split identity” challenge that I described in section one, considering Obama wrote it himself. *Chicago* magazine wrote, “Obama labored over [the speech] for weeks, harvesting lines that he had already tested on Illinois crowds” (Bernstein, 2007). But, nevertheless, the speech provides an opportunity for rhetorical analysis that exemplifies capturing a particular voice, and one that is appropriate to the speaker’s identity and the occasion.

Despite the fact that Obama “the writer” and Obama “the speaker” involved the same person writing one speech, a sense of relinquishing a writer’s own voice is still applicable. As I mentioned in section one, staying true to a speaker’s voice does not always involve imitation, but instead representation. When speakers orate publicly, they assume a persona that is different from their day-to-day self, and this desired and modified version of themselves is what speeches aim to capture. Even in this self-written

address, Obama still had to compose a style that, in many ways, might have been unlike his own “natural” voice. It is almost impossible to say what specific aspects of the speech were altered to meet the voice he envisioned for himself without Obama divulging this information himself, but it can be said with certainty that it was done, and that—given the response to his address—it was done successfully.

As Kristine Bruss’s (2011) interview with Alan Perlman shared, there are three levels of consideration that speechwriters follow to remain faithful to a speaker’s natural voice (or, in most cases, their intended one): (1) verbal style, (2) rhetorical techniques, and (3) intellectual character. Obama’s keynote address can be broke down into all three.

In this address, Obama’s verbal style is characterized by relatively short sentences, uninterrupted syntax that enables an easy and fluid performance. Barack Obama is now known for his prowess as a captivating rhetor through his natural dexterity with rhythm, dynamics, and nonverbal communication, and it began with the delivery of this speech. Because of his aptitude for speaking, Obama’s address does not rely on complicated language, but instead accentuates his strengths with brevity and clarity in his sentences. “Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you: They don’t want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or by the Pentagon,” he says, “Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can’t teach kids to learn.” His syntax is concise and direct, making his style easily understood and relatable to audiences: “Let me be clear. We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued. And they must be defeated,” and “In the end, that’s what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism, or do we participate in a politics of hope?” Without cluttered and complex sentences, his use of comparisons (“cynicism” versus “hope”) and repetitive crescendos shine through with sparkling simplicity:

Well, I say to them tonight, there’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America...We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

The rhetorical techniques weaved throughout the address have also become a staple of Obama's identity as a speaker, involving heavy use of narrative, story "moments," and imagery. Alan Perlman asserts that the appropriate rhetorical techniques for a speaker depend on how the speaker "like[s] to prove things and explain things" (cited in Bruss, 2011, p. 169). For Obama, this appears to be through storytelling. Knowing that long, complex stories are difficult to adequately communicate in speeches, Obama makes use of Steven Cohen's (2011) storytelling "moments" described in section one. In these, the rhetor identifies vital snapshots from the story and centers the setting, the characters, the plot, and the moral around these focal points. Obama says,

...we have more work to do for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now they're having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay 7 bucks an hour; more to do for the father I met who was losing his job and chocking back the tears wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits that he counted on; more to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her who have the grades, have the drive, have the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.

Here, Obama succinctly and vividly shares the setting, the characters, the plot, and the moral in one-sentence increments, repeating this pattern with different "moments" to make a more generalized statement about the country. It is these focal points that audiences remember.

He also constructs his own identity using poignant narrative, a strategy that was arguably the most successful in transporting him so quickly to the presidential race. Painting himself as the archetypal benefactor of the "American dream," Obama shares his personal narrative for the first fourth of the speech:

Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya...My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential.

In this passage, Obama shapes the identity that would follow him into the presidency, and will continue to shape perceptions of him as a public leader. Again, these storytelling “moments” were crafted expertly to serve a specific purpose—identify with the audience, and identify with the American dream—and the simplicity of them was appropriate for his speechwriting.

Third on Perlman’s list is intellectual character, which dictates how the speaker will share what they know and what they have to offer. For this particular speech, with Obama as a rookie to the national audience, he relies on visions of a future America rather than his political résumé to persuade his audience. Saying, “I believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs, and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices and meet the challenges that face us,” Obama points to his intellectual potential rather than his track record, which at this point is minimal, and supports candidate John Kerry who he believes matches his same ideals for progress. Given the rhetorical situation—with Obama being a newcomer and having to spend much of his speech endorsing John Kerry—Obama identified the right tactic in framing his narrative for future political endeavors, but leaving the résumé lines for supporting John Kerry, the current and more experienced candidate. Doing so seemed to resonate deeply with audiences who shared his same hopes for America going forward and were able to visualize Obama as a future president of the United States.

In addition to writing for the appropriate rhetorical voice, Obama’s speech was made successful by his adherence to language that was designed to be heard rather than seen. Without the visual component of reading text on a page, or the ability to pause and reread for clarity, audiences must be drawn in by short phrases, aural aesthetics, and repetition. It must be conversational—even in formal situations like the Democratic National Convention—making audiences feel as though they’re beings spoken to directly. The language is casual, but not unprofessional. Sophisticated, but not uptight. Obama struck a perfect balance with his clean and concise sentences, continuing to repeat the syntax for the gradual building effect I described earlier:

If there’s a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for their prescription and having to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life



poorer, even if it's not my grandparent. If there's an Arab-American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

The words flowed from his mouth with ease, emphasizing that the language was crafted specifically to be uttered casually and naturally. Audiences can quickly decipher when a rhetor is uncomfortable with the rhythm and the diction that comes off their lips, as they tend to trip over words or seem to have hijacked a voice that doesn't quite fit their style. Obama, however, was simply emoting throughout the address, the diction resonating in his diaphragm and the syntax in tune with his heartbeat. This contributed to his effortlessly casual sense of eloquence, which can so easily be overdone in public speaking. While eloquence can be misapplied in attempts to achieve it, Obama achieved this sophistication by adhering to his identity and voice as a rhetor, as well as strategically crafting language to be heard. The result, as we now know in hindsight, carried him through the democratic primaries all the way to the White House, where Americans have come to know and recognize his signature style.

### SECTION 3: A Speechwriting Piece

Good morning President Alger, Board of Visitors, guests, friends, family, the James Madison University community, and the Class of 2015.

We are, of course, here today to celebrate each of our individual accomplishments. But I think we'd be missing a key component of the JMU degree if we did not also celebrate the JMU experience itself.

JMU wasn't founded until 1908, but the groundwork for our university was laid long before. It was laid in 1751 when James Madison, the statesman and our namesake, was born, and his ideas about engagement and civic discourse began to form. In 1787, when Madison and our founding fathers were drafting, debating, and convening about the Constitution—although at JMU this date resonates more with FrOGs in yellow t-shirts and bright-eyed first years being enveloped by their new home. And in 1789, where the work of Madison, the “Father of the Constitution,” finally came into force.

These dates would later be etched into the foundational values of JMU, a national model for the engaged university. A university that continues to live out the ideals of

James Madison while also looking toward the future with students who actively want to Be The Change.

We've seen it in JMU's commitment to engaged learning, where our professors' office doors are open to students far more than they probably have time for. Where it's near impossible to come by a JMU Duke who hasn't studied abroad, completed an internship, performed undergraduate research, or participated in a capstone or service learning course.

We've seen it in JMU's emphasis on civic engagement, where students care about democratic affairs, they care about change, they have a steadfast drive to contribute to the common good, and they care about achieving all this through respectful and meaningful dialogue. That's James Madison—whose skills in debate shaped our nation in its nascence. And that's James Madison University—where I have consistently seen students fight for change, fight for something different, and, most importantly, fight for what's right.

And finally, we've seen it in JMU's engagement with the community, where through either academics, extracurriculars, or other callings, JMU students realize that part of the college experience—part of learning, even—is being a productive and helpful member of the community. That's why JMU has one of the largest Alternative Break Programs in the country, where students give up their time off from school to give back. And that's why about 1,500 students per year are placed in community agencies by the JMU Community Service Learning program.

Dukes, if there's one lesson to glean from all of that, it's that we are lucky. I know that James Madison would be proud of this university. Because for all of those reasons I listed, JMU students are different. We're graduating not just with a degree, but with an experience, a mindset, that has made ethics and engagement a critical part of each of us.

Today, we're all happy to celebrate our hard work. Our late nights in the library, breakthroughs in research, papers we slaved over and couldn't wait to turn in.

But here's the thing, Dukes: That was the easy part.

In fact, if there's one thing we can take away from Madison and this university it's that education shouldn't make you feel omniscient, done, or complete—it should humble you. In addition to becoming experts in chemistry, history, political science, or

health sciences, I hope that you've also become experts in asking questions, in admitting when you're not sure, and then seeking out the answers.

There is still so much we don't know. Despite the fact that we're all here today to honor the completion of a degree of higher education, we are here to celebrate commencement—a new beginning, as it's called—and I hope that, for all of you, this is the beginning of a commitment to lifelong learning.

And there's still so much to do. Ladies, let's not forget that many women in the world are not allowed to receive an education like the one we just have. And, gentlemen, don't forget that you are always part of that solution, too. Let's all be solutions, let's all be engaged, let's all Be The Change. That's part of James Madison University, and now it's a part of all of us.

So, congratulations, Class of 2015. Take that degree and spread it out into the world. I can't wait to open my newspaper, or turn on my TV, one day and see that you have.

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*CHAPTER 4*

**PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

## SECTION 1: Personal Narrative Research

Telling our own stories is perhaps one of the most natural forms of communication we have, but it is one that seems to be more and more discouraged the further along we get in our academic and professional lives. When we are first learning to write, we often begin with personal narrative stories where we recount our adventures, share our passions, and reveal parts of ourselves that excite or intrigue our readers. But somewhere along the way, as we begin to write more academically, we're told to remove our voice, get rid of subjectivity, and leave out personal experience. Our identity is removed from our writing to, ironically, increase our credibility; our natural instincts to tell stories as narrative humans are phased out to make room for "facts," which, oddly, aren't supposed to be associated or resonate with our own lived experiences.

This isn't to say that it's always appropriate for academic or professional writing to be mixed with narrative, but we can't systematically remove narrative writing from our repertoires completely. Our motivations for writing personal narratives are various and individually realized, but two general impetuses persist.

First, personal narrative writing allows us to reclaim the past and redefine our years spent, position ourselves for the present, or claim the future. Typically, we think of personal narratives being written after certain events in our lives, especially given the fact that the style requires reflection on our part to explain the significance of our story. But in getting to know ourselves better as people by writing our narratives, we are also able to understand who we are now, and who we might be in the future.

Second, we tell our stories to explain the world we live in. Because we don't exist and grow in a vacuum, the narratives we tell reveal a great deal about the cultures we've been exposed to, the politics surrounding us, and the sociological frameworks we've been privy to. Despite some of our best efforts to remain independent and unshaken by society, we are inevitably products of the cultures that nurture us, and it is through these shared elements of the human condition that authors and readers connect through personal narrative. There is an understanding in this genre of writing, as with any other, that even if writers and readers do not share exact life events or identical emotions, they are able to bond over concepts larger than themselves.

But despite the incredible potential of power through personal stories, there are perhaps two main fears immediately produced by the personal narrative genre. Beyond the fact that we are constantly told to remove ourselves from our writing, we fear the effects of self-disclosure, for reasons that are complex and varied. Personal narrative, however, can be used as a means of self-discovery and to join versions of our “self” through reflection and writing. In addition, we fear that our life events do not merit narratives—that they are too boring, too common, or just that we cannot write about them in a way that others will find interesting. But once we learn to live autobiographically, acknowledge that we have imperfect memories, and remember that personal narratives are ultimately for others, we come closer to crafting narratives that are interesting, are not self-destructive, and are thoroughly enjoyed by and connected to others.

### **Self-disclosure: Sharing our lives, good or bad**

The first fear associated with personal narratives is relatively predictable: having to analyze, explain, and then share personal aspects of our lives that may reveal flaws in our character; expose friends, family, and colleagues (after all, writing a personal narrative involves incorporating others); and resurrect scenes that we’d rather not live through again. As humans, we move on, file events away in hidden places, forget about things, and become new versions of ourselves as we grow and evolve. For these memories to resurface with enough clarity to write about them, we often have to replay each scene in excruciating detail. And in order to be truthful and forthright with our readers, we should not blur or discard blotches in our character, or those of others, when they impact the meaning of the story.

Putting narratives onto paper can be a painful process for writers, as well as for those who appear as flawed characters in these stories. This discomfort can prevent writers from beginning to craft personal narratives in the first place, afraid of what might surface in their memories and how it might be interpreted by readers, or it can lead writers to publish narratives with half-truths, interesting anecdotes left out, and lessons learned omitted. These flawed aspects of our lives are often the very things worth writing about, however, and putting them down on paper serves a social function in connecting to our readers and encouraging them to learn something from our life experiences.



While we need stories of fiction to transport us to places un-lived and unknown, we also need writers to share stories that are real, that come straight from their own consciousness. We need to understand the personal details of narratives that are often suppressed in everyday public discourse and to recognize how they affect us as people.

If nothing else, writing is a process of self-discovery. The more I have written, the more I have learned what has probably been subconsciously stored in the back of my mind since I first learned to put pen to paper: writing is a form of self-discovery and knowledge-building. By diligently attempting to convey our thoughts in written form, we learn a great deal about what we actually believe; by telling stories, we are forced to recall incredible detail, which makes writers' ability to notice that much more keen; and by learning to write something well, we must know the subject forwards and backwards. For personal narratives, the aspect of self-discovery is even more underscored. It can be healing in ways, productive in ways, and risky in others, for us to record our stories and share them. In the process, we learn what our flaws are, why we've made mistakes in the past, how our families and our surroundings have shaped us, why things upset us when they probably shouldn't, and why we hold on to things we know we should leave behind.

Jim Corder, a famous scholar of rhetoric, maintained a style that is known for its interwoven personal experiences and narratives. Corder (1985) has said that "None of us lives without a history; each of us is a narrative. We're always standing some place in our lives, and there is always a tale of how we came to stand there, though few of us have marked carefully the dimensions of the place where we are or kept time with the tale of how we came to be there" (p. 16). As personal narrative writers, we trace these breadcrumbs for ourselves, and by writing them down we allow others to follow our paths, too. Perhaps our readers' paths are similar to ours and they'll begin to understand deeper aspects of themselves through our own narratives; or perhaps their trail was laid out on a different map entirely, and they'll begin to understand the paths of others who, until seeing their footsteps laid out, seemed so different from them. When we talk about ourselves, "we perform a work of self-construction" rather than engaging in a form of self-indulgence and vanity, because there is "an extremely close and dynamic relation between narrative and identity, for narrative is not only a literary form but part of the fabric of our lived experience" (Eakin, 2008, p. 2), says Paul John Eakin, whose scholarly

expertise includes autobiography, biography, and life writing. We so often ignore the significance of the various cloths that form our life stories, and stitching them together through crafting personal narratives helps us to, ultimately, understand who we are.

Citing Damasio, Eakin (2008) tells us that in creating these narratives, we call on two versions of ourselves: the simplest level of our “core consciousness” or “core self”, and our more complex “extended consciousness” or “autobiographical self” that develops from our core selves. In our narratives, our core selves refer to what can be called the “Character I,” versus the extended consciousness that forms our “Teller I.”

Damasio defined core consciousness as an “unvarnished sense of our individual organism in the act of knowing” (cited in Eakin, 2008, p. 70). Put in Eakin’s words, our cores stem from our “individual first-person perspective, ownership, [and] agency” (p. 71). It is, ideally, the rawest and purest form of our selves and is the self we try to tap into and explain through our autobiographical selves. It is the self that thinks, does, and reacts and is the self that, in the flesh, experiences the events of our life stories. It is the self that is true, that represents our identities in their most authentic forms.

These core selves, however, are not the selves that craft our personal narratives. Rather, it is our extended and autobiographical selves, which are “enabled by the human organism’s vast memory capacity” (Eakin, 2008, p. 71), that narrate our life events. Eakin tells us, “autobiographical memory permits a constantly updated and revised ‘aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviorally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future’” (Damasio cited in Eakin, 2008, p. 71). Once we’ve stepped away from the exact moments in which we experience events, the voices of our autobiographical selves allow space for reflection and a broader perspective outside the one we had in the moment. We are able to extract larger implications, synthesize information, and eventually write the narrative in a way that demonstrates an understanding of what happened, and an understanding of who we were when that event occurred. It is impossible for us compose narratives in the exact moments we are experiencing them, so we rely on the memory and the perspective of our extended consciousness to recall the emotions and immediate reactions of our core selves at the time in order to write balanced personal narratives.

The difficulty in writing these narratives arises in bringing these two selves together into as close to one congruent identity as we can achieve. It is an immense undertaking, but it is one that we must faithfully attempt to do in order to maintain our credibility as writers and as narrative selves. The second an event is over, we have already become a modified version of the person who just experienced it. And certainly by the time we get around to writing about these stories, we have grown and evolved in ways that may be drastic enough as to make our “self” in that moment unrecognizable to us during the writing process.

Another added complexity is the concept of “self” in the first place. For the most part, we tend to describe our identities only in relation to that of others. We only label ourselves “smart” if those around us seem to exhibit characteristics of lesser intelligence; we seldom label ourselves “outgoing” if everyone we know is also incredibly socially active. Our sense of selves is constructed through others—the people who have raised us, who we’ve befriended, who have taught us, and who have crossed into our paths at some point or another. Therefore, who are we exactly? And, how do we know? If we are only products of our culture, of “nurture” versus nature, would we be different people had we had different parents, different friends, different teachers? Yes. And, can we have more than one “self” that we tailor to varying social and contextual situations? Yes. But pinpointing an exact self is attempting to define something that doesn’t actually exist—our selves change, grow, and retreat backward with each second that we’re alive, so it is an impossible task.

Instead, all that is required of us as writers is to put our best efforts toward joining our core selves and our extended selves in the best way we can. As Jim Corder (1985) puts it, “making the fiction of our lives—not at all the same as discovering a way to present an objective, externally verifiable history, which is not possible, anywhere—is not by nature limited, valueless, ignorant, despicable, or ‘merely subjective.’ It is human,” (p. 17). It is part of what makes narratives so interesting, so varying, and proves why we write them.

### **Our lives as narratives, for others**

The second fear associated with personal narrative, while potentially less obvious than the threats of self-disclosure, can be just as crippling for writers—the thought that our experiences and the years of life we’ve lived aren’t valuable enough, interesting enough, or unique enough to be retold and shared with others. I’ve feared, for example, that my life has been so vanilla that anything even tinged with any creative writing potential would seem hyperbolized, too eager, not groundbreaking enough. We can become afraid that our insights don’t add anything valuable, that the marks we’ve made on this earth will easily fade, and that what we record won’t spark any interest among our readers. To combat this fear, however, we must acknowledge that personal narratives are not solely about what events have happened to us, but the artistic ways in which we write about them. This particular aspect—of noticing, of analysis, and of descriptive writing—is what the personal narrative is about at its core.

Because personal narratives are written for others, not just to be tucked away in our diaries or personal notes, this artful writing process is what draws readers in. In fact, it is precisely what differentiates personal narratives from diary excerpts and jotted-down notes that we’ve saved throughout our lives. They are written to be enjoyed, shared, savored, and hopefully learned from.

But when does personal writing become reminiscent of a diary—void of valuable insight to others, perhaps too emotionally invested, or self-centered? “As readers, we rarely want to read an essay that smacks either of the therapist’s couch or revenge prose,” says Alice LaPlante (2010), author of *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*. In both cases, “the writer hasn’t yet gained enough perspective for wisdom or literature to emerge from [the] experience.” Unlike diary entries, personal narratives have something to offer others—they are not simply streams of consciousness, mindless recordings of daily happenings, or are so personal that readers cannot identify with the subject. Their telling is purposeful, and “they are intended to serve ends beyond pure expression of opinion or cathartic confession” (Spigelman, 2001, p. 66), Candace Spigelman tells us in her scholarly piece, “Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal.” The intricate details that are so characteristic of the personal narrative writing style assist in this process. So often, we are told to keep things concise, but because we

are encouraging readers to enter lives that are ours and not their own, these details are what give personal narratives soul and personality; and, in these descriptions, we dig deeper into ourselves and connect to our readers at greater depths, ones that grasp at bigger-picture ideas. As writers, our job is to identify larger, unifying themes of the human experience that stem from our experiences and write about those. And if these themes don't immediately present themselves to us, it is also our duty to seek them out—they exist within every thread of our lived experiences, whether we are aware of it or not.

Without these overarching concepts threaded into our narratives, they can cross the line of becoming *too* personal. When this occurs, readers pull away from the reader and the narrative, recognizing that they've unintentionally broached territory that does not connect with them and seems to resemble voyeurism, or an awkward interruption of a personal moment rather than one that the author has intentionally crafted for us to read. Readers can easily tell the difference. When a narrative more closely resembles an emotional rant, simmering with bitterness, or containing lingering resentment that hasn't yet been pacified, audiences can tell that this narrative wasn't yet ready to be written. The author seems to still be living in the moment with tunnel vision rather than speaking with a retrospective sense of wisdom or newness that we expect from the extended consciousness, or the "Teller I." In reality, personal narratives are not about us—through their social function, they are about others, about the human condition, told through us as the main character.

Writing personal narratives also requires us to recognize that everyone is interesting, and everyone is a story. Often, excellent personal narratives are inspired by what could initially seem like the most stale or monotonous happenings: a fight over a sponge between two roommates, a daily walk to work that never changes, a favorite sweater. We are all comprised of stories about how we came to be who we are, both unique and universal in nature. And, there is no shame in writing about unassuming objects or events, as long as our writer's insight shines through and our authorial voice is enticing.

Consider G. K. Chesterton's (1905) narrative titled "A Piece of Chalk":

I remember one splendid morning, all blue and silver, in the summer holidays, when I reluctantly tore myself away from the task of doing nothing in particular, and put on a hat

of some sort and picked up a walking-stick, and put six very bright-coloured chalks in my pocket. I then went into the kitchen...and asked the owner and the occupant of the kitchen if she had any brown paper...I explained to her that I only wanted to draw pictures on it, and that I did not want them to endure in the least; and that from my point of view, therefore, it was a question not of tough consistency, but of responsive surface, a thing comparatively irrelevant in a parcel. When she understood that I wanted to draw she offered to overwhelm me with note-paper, apparently supposing that I did my notes and correspondence on old brown paper wrappers from motives of economy.

In this piece, Chesterton takes the simplicity of chalk and turns it into a narrative that encompasses thematic elements much bigger than the object itself, seeming to weave in aspects of life and religion later on. His inspiration arose from a seemingly insignificant object, but he was able to draw larger implications from chalk that speak to and connect with readers on a much higher level.

Paul John Eakin (2008) has appropriately described a concept on narrative writing that is evident in the title of his book, *Living Autobiographically*. In order to begin writing narratives about moments that have happened to us personally, we cannot block our creativity by assuming in self-deprecation that our lives are not worthy of the narratives we have yet to write. Instead, as Eakin suggests, we *are* walking stories. Each moment that we breathe, ponder, act, react, and grow, we are adding new anecdotes and wisdom to our narratives. Our “selves” exist continuously over time and each of our individual narratives are tied to the specific events we’ve undergone—we don’t contain identifying personal characteristics or traits that are unwedded from the experiences we’ve endured. It is, therefore, our task as writers to call our existence into being, to reflect on our lives as autobiographies and narratives waiting to be written.

Eakin (2008) says, “It is always tempting to think that living a life would come before making a life story...We never catch ourselves in the act of *becoming selves*” (p. 148). This concept of “living autobiographically” does not just apply to the idea of humans *being* and embodying narratives. Referring back to the core self and the extended self, the act of living autobiographically calls on us to be in touch with our core selves through the retrospect afforded to us by our extended selves in the writing process. Crafting personal narratives is one way to do this, and it puts us in contact with our readers in order to satisfy personal narratives’ social function as well.

Part of the reason we write narratives in a way that resonates with others is that our core selves are always rooted in culture. Regardless of when we live and how we live, it is culture that raises us. The “personal” in personal narratives should not always connote mere individualism or seclusion. Yes, we are each very much individuals, comprising a synthesis of different life events and unique strands of lived DNA, but even when we are isolated, we are in isolation as a reaction to something that is occurring within the context around us. Eakin says, “It is not easy to assess the impact of individualism on our thinking about ourselves and lives for such a belief tends to promote a false sense of empowerment, masking the work of the other forces that shape us” (p. 89). Further, he asks, “To what extent are the selves we think we are and the life stories we think we’ve lived the product of our position in a field of large-scale cultural forces?” (p. 89). In a nation like the United States that promotes individualism to such great lengths, it can be difficult to see our cherished identities as products of larger cultural forces. We cling tightly to our agency, tending to believe that we have made our own choices and carried out the lives we’ve selected for ourselves. But so much of who we are, as people and as narratives, derives from others—culturally, politically, and socially. As such, these forces must be present in our narratives—for they have shaped our narratives—and, more than any of our “personal” events and experiences, they contribute to the common threads we share with our readers.

Take, for example, Jeannette Walls’s memoir (2005), *The Glass Castle*:

I looked around the room. There were the turn-of-the-century bronze-and-silver vases and the old books with worn leather spines that I’d collected at flea markets. There were the Georgian maps I’d had framed, the Persian rugs, and the overstuffed leather armchair I liked to sink into at the end of the day. I’d tried to make a home for myself here, tried to turn the apartment into the sort of place where the person I wanted to be would live. But I could never enjoy the room without worrying about Mom and Dad huddled on a sidewalk grate somewhere. I fretted about them, but I was embarrassed by them, too, and ashamed of myself for wearing pearls and living on Park Avenue while my parents were busy keeping warm and finding something to eat. (p. 4)

In *The Glass Castle*, Walls reconstructs her childhood as a member of a poverty-stricken and dysfunctional family—one in which her father was a drunk and her mother was a free spirit who didn’t seem to want the responsibility of motherhood at all, both of

whom she still loved despite everything. Recognizing that her peculiar upbringing molded her in ways she may not have even known, Walls's memoir exemplifies this idea that our identities are constructed by our surroundings, whether we allow them to or not.

The challenge here is combating the impossibility of capturing earlier "selves," reconstructing pasts that we haven't lived for a while. And, even if we had captured every detail of our lives' scenes on film, we'd still be different people writing about them than the people on screen. In her unfinished memoir, "A Sketch of the Past" (now in *Moments of Being*) Virginia Woolf wrote, "a great part of every day is not lived consciously," contributing to moments of being and non-being, making the art of personal narrative a fantastically difficult one to conquer. While events are happening to us, our vision is clouded with the perspective of the present, preventing us from seeing our entire surroundings, yet it is our job in writing personal narratives to somehow re-sketch these moments for our readers. Woolf says:

Every day includes more non-being than being...[And] These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton...The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being...I have never been able to do both.

To compensate, personal narratives—as with framing "reality" in creative nonfiction pieces—only reflect constructions of ourselves created by authors themselves retrospectively looking back on their experiences to decipher who they were at the time, and who they are now. Candace Spigelman (2001) emphasizes that although memoirs "appear as acts of self-revelation, voluntary self-descriptions of a life and of life experiences, contemporary critics recognize these acts as hermeneutic figurings organized to tell a story of coherent experience and organized by means of a narrative persona, a representation, rather than the 'real' flesh and bones autobiographer or essayist" (p. 64). It is a futile mission to resurrect exact recreations of our past selves. And to do so anyway would be to violate the structure of personal narratives as containing two separate selves, core and extended, that fuse together as both character and reflective narrator.

Jim Corder (1985) tells us:



...though we are all fiction-makers/historians, we are seldom all that good at the work. Sometimes we can't find all that's needed to make the narrative we want of ourselves, though we still make our narrative. Sometimes we don't see enough. Sometimes we find enough and see enough and still tell it wrong. Sometimes we fail to judge either the events within our narrative or the people, places, things, and ideas that might enter our narrative. Sometimes we judge dogmatically, even ignorantly, holding only to standards that we have already accepted or established. We see only what our eyes will let us see at a given moment, but eventually make a narrative of ourselves that we can enjoy, tolerate, or at least not have to think about too much. (p. 16)

Still, this idea that writers of memoir are painting modified, exaggerated, or inaccurate portraits of themselves—like with so many genres of creative writing—calls into question ethical dilemmas that authors must face. In another of Eakin's (2004) books, *The Ethics of Life Writing*, Paul Lauritzen recalls an instance in which his morality as a writer was called into question. Lauritzen had written a candid account of his experience with being infertile despite wanting children, and through his writing he raised questions about the ethics of reproductive technology. His readers, many of whom related to his infertility due to their own struggles with becoming parents, responded favorably to his article. However, by the time Lauritzen's article made it to print, he and his wife had conceived and given birth to a child, and readers who discovered this were angered by the betrayal they felt in response to Lauritzen's first-person account of infertility. Despite the fact that Lauritzen's narrative and motives as an author had been completely honest at the time he wrote the article, Lauritzen as the "Character I" had changed after his words hit print.

Instead of writing personal narratives off as unethical, however, "we will need to devise measures and means of analysis to evaluate claims derived from personal experience just as we have devised evaluative tools for other kinds of arguments" (Spigelman, 2001, p. 83) says Spigelman. We have accepted systems of judging error in scientific experiments, surveys, history. It seems that to do the same for personal narrative would simply be following the same systems of measure for other disciplines. "And because...narrative is indeed a way of thinking and a way of reasoning that has been in our human repertoire since earliest times, we should certainly be able to see that,

although its form is not transparent, narrative too offers claims, reasons and evidence for serious analysis and critique,” Spigelman (2001) added.

Part of understanding memoirs is acknowledging that once we publish them, they become cultural artifacts. And with personal narratives, this leads to our own lives being interpreted by readers, judged for accuracy and credibility. Many will find flaws in the personas our extended selves have constructed of our core selves, but this flawed system is natural, it is human, and it is part of what makes personal narrative writing an art.

## SECTION 2: Personal Narrative Analysis

Several days before Christmas in 2003, writer Joan Didion’s daughter Quintana had entered complete septic shock after becoming ill from what, at first, appeared to be pneumonia. Didion and her husband, fellow writer John Gregory Dunne, had continuously been visiting Quintana in the hospital since then. On one particular night—just prior to New Year’s Eve—Didion and Dunne returned home from visiting her when they sat down to dinner and Dunne suffered a massive and fatal coronary.

*Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

Given these sentences that open Joan Didion’s (2005) memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, readers might shudder at their imagination of 227 pages of grimness and grief ahead. Indeed, it is somewhat unimaginable for a book about the simultaneous death of a husband and the chronic, grave illness of a child to be anything but depressing. Through her command over the personal narrative genre, however, Didion has created a masterpiece in which solitary grieving is important, but not the focus, and even those who may have never experienced loss find themselves hooked.

The strength of *The Year of Magical Thinking* as a personal narrative stems from Didion’s sophisticated oscillations between her core consciousness and extended consciousness, differentiating the two, but also allowing them to ebb and flow concurrently throughout the book. Her core consciousness—the “Character I”—is the Joan Didion experiencing her husband’s death, who feels the emptiness and the numbness and the insanity. Her extended consciousness—the “Teller I”—is the Didion

who is looking back at her husband's death and analyzing the situation with retrospect, revealing to readers with a newfound perspective who she was at the time.

Didion's core consciousness is the one who experiences the ambulance crew in the living room, thinking, "the next logical step would be going to the hospital. It occurred to me that the crew could decide very suddenly to go to the hospital and I would not be ready" (p. 12), but it is her extended consciousness who recalls and shares with readers, "Everyone else in sight was wearing scrubs. He was not. 'Is this the wife,' he said to the driver, then turned to me. 'I'm your social worker,' he said, and I guess that is when I must have known" (p. 13). In pairing the two, readers get a glimpse of who Didion was at the time, but an even deeper sense of her when her narrator's voice steps in to provide insight that only an extended consciousness reflecting on its core can.

In the book, the thoughts and actions of the core consciousness are sporadic, reactive, spotty, and potentially dizzying for readers—because that is who Didion's "self" was at the time. However, Didion's extended consciousness swoops in as the narrator to draw connections between the haphazard string of events, making sense of the scattered thoughts, and inserting meaning into otherwise seemingly trivial anecdotes. Without the pairing of these consciousnesses, the book would read like a therapy session, with Didion on the couch spitting out her memories in a disorganized stream of consciousness, while the therapist sits across from her, analyzing her thoughts and making sense of them. However, Didion succeeds in the crucial role that personal narrative authors strive to achieve as both patient and therapist, narrating the events as she experienced them but also being the one to provide interpretations for readers.

Further, Didion's elegance in describing the trauma she endured is indicative of her appropriate timing in sharing this story. When emotions are too raw, personal narrative writers are unable to discern between a Character I and a Teller I because time and distance have not cleanly divided them yet. But Didion, who actually crafts her narrative with a great deal of retrospect and insight, demonstrates the power of narrative's ability to extract larger implications and synthesize information in a way that eventually serves the social function of the personal narrative—of making our life stories resonant and applicable for readers who have not shared our same life journey.

Early on in the book, Didion says,

On most surface levels I seemed rational. To the average observer I would have appeared to fully understand that death was irreversible. I had authorized the autopsy. I had arranged for cremation...We had Gregorian chant, for John. Quintana asked that the chant be in Latin. John too would have asked that. We had a single roaring trumpet. We had a Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest...I had done it. I had acknowledged that he was dead. I had done this in as public a way as I could conceive. Yet my thinking on this point remained suspiciously fluid.” (p. 42-43)

Her use of language is not alarming, nor is it troubled or heavy-handed. For most of the book—especially in scenes where Didion’s core consciousness is at the forefront—the sentences are short and to-the-point. Her authorial voice is cemented with ease—her short, staccato sentences assert certain truth, mimicking the sense of urgency that is characteristic of the mind during an unexpected emergency, and the numbness that follows. Her syntax mirrors the information processing of the brain during high stress, where data is absorbed and calculated in short segments at a rapid-fire pace. But the brevity of the sentences—even after the high-intensity scenes are over—is also representative of the emptiness that grief imposes, where composing even short thoughts is exhausting and your heavy heart can only make room for essentiality.

In writing this highly “personal” memoir, Didion’s self-disclosure is artful. She exposes flawed aspects of herself, even recognizing at a point that grief has the power to “derange the mind,” explaining how the insanity manifested itself in her.

I see now that my insistence on spending that first night alone was more complicated than it seemed, a primitive instinct. Of course I knew John was dead. Of course I had already delivered the definitive news to his brother and to my brother and to Quintana’s husband...Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible. That was why I needed to be alone...I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking. (p. 33)

In such “magical thinking” moments—where she convinces herself that her husband will return, even refusing to give away his shoes because he’d need them when he got back—Didion’s extended consciousness acknowledges her former core consciousness’s irrationality. But in her mind, at the time, it was entirely logical, and through her narrative, she convinces sympathetic and agreeing readers of this. For those

who've experienced loss, this resonates; for those who haven't, it still does somehow. *This is the way it was, and, to me, it was right*, she seems to be saying. And readers cannot—or, at least, will not—argue with her logic.

It is clear in her writing that for Didion this piece encompassed writing as a form of self-discovery and self-construction. Throughout the book, Didion traces her own breadcrumbs throughout her first year as a widow, unearthing complicated aspects of her grieving process but also making sense of how she changed as a person in that year of magical thinking. As she alludes to, one of the myths of the grieving process is that it will be formulaic, moving from one step to the other seamlessly, progressing from shock and anger to eventual healing. It would not have been quite as perceptive a process of self-construction had her grieving followed this formula, however, and Didion argues that it's perhaps a mythic formula that doesn't exist in the first place:

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it...We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks...A certain forward movement will prevail...We have no way of knowing that the funeral itself will be anodyne, a kind of narcotic regression in which we are wrapped in the care of others and the gravity and meaning of the occasion. Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself. (p. 188-189)

Here, Didion uses writing as an explanatory process to reveal some of her innermost thoughts and aspects of her identity within the memoir, showing others the detailed aspects of her path as well. And with all of these rhetorical elements combined, Didion satisfies the ultimate test of the genre: the social function of the personal narrative.

If, as I mentioned in Section 1, we share our narratives for others, Didion has embodied this in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. For a book that is almost entirely about her continuous and pervasive experience with grief, it is hardly ever about Didion. Though the word "I" is frequent, a sense of Didion as "I" is somehow scarce. Instead, what cuts through the text is a shared experience of the universal pain of grief, with readers all over the world unanimously nodding and tearing up or chuckling in agreement.

### SECTION 3: A Personal Narrative Piece

I had anticipated the inevitable transformation of body that loomed—I'd prepared for it, braced myself for it—but I was blind to the shifts in mind, in spirit, that I had not recognized to be inextricably linked with my physical identity.

The lie I told myself was that I would run, run, run, despite hating it. I'd redirect my energy toward a new form of physical activity, despite the fact that I'd been married to a particular one for fifteen out of the first eighteen years of my life. I would cut dance out of my world as soon as I took the last bow at my senior-year recital, like an addict taking their fixation to the chopping block in place of backing out slowly. I would sacrifice this love for a new one, releasing this era of my life into the audience blurred by stage lights, allowing it to be their joy, or their burden, because it was both to me at the time.

But, it wasn't until after I'd retired from dancing that I understood what it was I had been able to do for those fifteen long, short, years.

Dancing, as sport and as art, demands a series of paradoxes, sets of disagreeing twins that work together as kin in order to function seamlessly in the body of a dancer; it calls forth muscle without brawn, strife without the appearance of strain, sinking weight into the hard, wooden floor while lifting up higher, uncomfortably higher, to appear weightless and immune to the physical forces of gravity.

Sewn into the fabric of dancers' bodies and minds are the power of Athena's trained and practiced skill, intelligence, and the strategic insight of battle as their limbs swipe through the air and the strength of their muscles seem to cut through their extended lines; as Aphrodite, dancers' graceful sweetness, gentility, and flirtatiousness with the audience entice unbroken attention while their long and softly stretched extremities obscure the force and tension beneath their skin.

The labor of the machine is silent, churning on mute aside from the soft landing of a high leap and the quiet exhalations of the engine. The appropriate melodies of the accompanying music, the dancers' companion, their coworker, are the only audible sounds, only broken in their finality to the overpowering eruption of applause.

At the end of that last performance, I didn't know that I would burst into tears—out of sadness, out of relief—once the final cadence of the strings and the piano resolved into silence and then into applause, the contrast of the two emotions confusing and bearing down on me as I moseyed into the stage wings and sensed the presence of my final exit into those opaque, velvety curtains.

Perhaps this signaled my first experience with the dislocation of mind and body that awaited me—of still being a dancer, but not dancing.

Of my mind believing that my legs still maintained their limber elasticity, able to be stretched beyond human normalcy into striking extensions. That even with a mere demi plié my thighs and calves could launch my body skyward, as if effortlessly rebounding

from a concealed spring. That, despite holding myself in relevé on one foot, I'd be able to balance myself through extensive fouéte sequences. That, contradicting all perceived physics, the tops of my toes would withstand the entire weight of my body en pointe, all while encased in the hard fabric and glue that formed the box of a pointe shoe. Of my mind telling me, through vivid muscle memory, that I was still physically capable of doing things I no longer could.

The machine disagreed with itself. Its mind kept pumping with the routine calculations it had been making for fifteen years—involuntarily causing me to choreograph dances in my mind each time I heard music, the programming still engrained in my psyche. The outer structure of the machine began to deteriorate, its intricate parts unused and neglected.

When dance was still a part of my life, I'd often rise from a high-stress bout of studying to lie on the carpet and stretch. The weight of my body sinking into the soft threads of the fabric complemented the tension of my arms pulling my limbs out of their stiff state, inducing the therapy of a dance class's warm-up session. But after I removed dance from my life (or had it exited mine?), I nixed this practice. Early on in my first year of college, I attempted this stretching exercise on the floor of my dormitory room, wondering if I could still do it, and was nearly moved to tears when I eased my legs into the splits and my body instantly recoiled.

Tightness had arrived first. At some point during my last performance, I'd pulled my hamstring and noticed immediately that without the routine stretching and warming of the muscles that I was used to every day, the strained muscle contracted and solidified itself into a rigid mass. Even my feet, which I had never considered flexible, grew stiff, the muscles that extended across the tops of my feet becoming resistant, my arches seizing into cramps if I attempted to point my feet for too long.

To my surprise, I seemed to lose weight in the first year or two that I wasn't dancing. But it was only attributed to the fact that my muscles were melting from my frame, disintegrating in protest of me dismissing them. And, paradoxically, the experience only made me feel heavier—at first due to the perception of weakness when lifting my limbs beyond sedentary positions, then compounded by actually gaining back the lost mass in adipose tissue.

Shortly after that last performance, I had committed to making a quick transition into running, believing that the sooner I took the plunge the more I'd be able to capitalize on the fact that I was still in shape. I purchased a pair of running shoes, and on that first run I donned a pair of my dance shorts in hopes of achieving a trace of familiarity.

The rhythm and awareness of body I'd become an expert at through dance did not transfer over. I was blind to the concept of pacing as I stopped and started, ran then walked, the engine pulsing with jarring infrequency before puttering out completely. My legs were comfortable with running—I hadn't lost any muscle just yet—but within two minutes, my lungs constricted, rejecting the air instead of absorbing it. My body seemed

to want to spit it back out as I grew nauseous and lightheaded. I spent time on the side of the road wheezing, unable to fathom how a machine so young, one which had danced twenty hours per week, could implode before reaching one mile.

Later came the loss of the most intangible physicality, of balance, control, and natural, fluid and rhythmic movement. I found that more and more frequently, my body did not quite follow what my mind told it to, perhaps because at this point they'd already become disjoined. If I really wanted to, I could gain my strength and flexibility back, I thought, but the rest of the qualities seemed unattainable. They were internal, invisible, inaccessible once let go.

I missed the weightlessness of my body, the success of which I had assumed to be natural instead of the product of a gradual effort toward developing lean muscle all those years—lean, causing me to believe them nonexistent. I had nostalgia for my sense of athleticism mixed with beauty, that each step was not only an achievement of physicality but also of style and delivery. I used to feel a sense of pride, of exquisiteness, when I performed an emotional contemporary piece or a high-energy jazz number. Now, when I ran, I sensed nothing but incompetence, bitterness, chore.

Early on, I believed this transformation of physical ability to be the source of my discomfort, simply harder to process than I'd anticipated. But I later realized that the pain of the schism was not so much physical as it was mental, the result of the dislocation.

More than anything, music was the sure-fire trigger. Indiscriminate to genre, hearing a piece of music would involuntarily lurch my consciousness into a vortex in which my mind began the instinctive choreography process. But the figure enacting the choreography inside my creative mind was an artist who exhibited grace, control, and immaculate physicality—it was me, but I no longer recognized her. Music, choreography, vision, realization. Cognitive dissonance. Repeated, each time I heard music. Each time no less grating.

What bewildered me at first was how discomforted I was with this friction despite not having had a viable future in dance. And I had made my own easy, simple decision to let go. I hadn't lost the identity of a soon-to-be professional dancer, one who had made it into a company and then suffered an injury, or whose body simply grew older and was forced to retire. I didn't have superlative technique, nor the perfect dancer's body—my legs were short, my feet not arched enough, my turnout average—but I'd been told that I excelled as a performer, and that was what I toted most proudly.

I'd attended to the nuances of performing—the slight smile on the right chord, the subtle eye contact with the audience before segueing into the next step, the tilt of the head to complete the line, the adjustment of physical dynamics in oscillating from sharp and hard-hitting to soft and delicate. In sports, there is praise for the grimace, furrowed eyebrows, even snarling. In dance, the force is internalized, and so is the pain, coming from and kept within. I'd been able to focus energy on aesthetic and ornamental subtleties while performing highly vigorous feats; I'd had the athletic and artistic



maturity to remain graceful, enticing, composed, even while the machine exhausted itself in high gear.

No more.

The transformation had been nuanced, too, but I'd taken painstakingly meticulous notice and become infatuated with the details, as I had with those performances. People told me I looked the same, but I didn't. In my mind, I'd suffered a complete metamorphosis, emerging not as a thing of beauty, but as a rusty, antiquated piece of machinery.

The muscles on my body no longer told their, my, story. The grace of my pointed toes, toe-ball-heel landings, and flexibility in everyday movement no longer told of my years of training and craftsmanship. I recognized that what our bodies can do tells us, and others, a great deal about who are—and I'd just discarded my own narrative.

My ability to dance no longer defined me to others, and though I had been eager to be more than a “dancer,” to leave dancing behind, I had not wanted it to leave me.

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