

John McPhee

by Norman Sims

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John McPhee's career as a literary journalist has been tangled with the history of *The New Yorker* magazine since he became a staff writer in 1965. Since then, McPhee's writing has become a model for literary journalists as he ranged over subjects as diverse as nuclear physics, oranges, Russian art, and the attempts of mere humans to alter the course of nature. At the same time, *The New Yorker*, which has published more literary journalism than any other American magazine, has seen the most pronounced changes in its history.

McPhee's work thrives on narrative and characterization. Yet his longest work, a four-book series on the geology of North America, involves a subject full of rocks and descriptions but short on characters. Critic Benjamin DeMott commented after McPhee's thirteenth book, "There is not a bad book among them, seldom indeed a laxly composed page. In short, John McPhee has become the name of a standard by which ambitious magazine journalism is now judged." The same could be said after his twenty-third book.

Whatever his subject matter, McPhee finds a way to make it interesting and artistic. He once wrote a book about oranges that surprised a reviewer in *Harper's* (March 1967): "You may come to the end of it and say to yourself, 'But I can't have read a whole book about oranges!' He writes like a charm, and without being cute, gimmicky, or in any way dull, he just tells you a lot about oranges." McPhee proves the value of "ordinary life" in literary journalism, but his writing techniques and style are far from ordinary.

McPhee organizes his material and structures his narratives before he starts writing. This tightly controlled method has allowed him to treat an unprecedented variety of subjects: basketball and tennis, art and airplanes, the New Jersey Pine Barrens and the wilderness of Alaska, atomic

energy and birchbark canoes, oranges and farmers, the Swiss Army and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the control of nature and the scientific revolution in plate tectonics that created modern geology.

“If you make a list of all the work I’ve ever done,” McPhee said during an interview, “and put a little mark beside things that relate to activities and interests I had before I was twenty, you’d have a little mark beside well over 90 percent of the pieces of writing.” McPhee’s early interests included sports, canoe camp in Vermont, airplanes, the subjects such as geology that he studied in school at Deerfield Academy and Princeton University, and learning to write. He has built an enduring relationship with Princeton. He teaches there, prefers to write in his office at the university, and several times has followed the lead of other professors into books on nuclear bombs and geology.

John McPhee’s father, Harry, was a doctor with a specialty in sports medicine who treated Princeton athletes and was a member of the faculty. Harry was born in 1895. For twenty years, he served as the United States physician at the Pan-American Games and the winter and summer Olympics. After a stay at Iowa State University, during which McPhee’s brother, Roemer, and his sister, Laura Anne, were born, the family moved to Princeton. He died in 1984. McPhee’s mother, Mary Ziegler, born in 1897, had been a French teacher in Cleveland before the marriage. Mary Ziegler’s father had been the editor of a book-publishing firm in Philadelphia. McPhee’s paternal great-grandparents had married in Scotland in 1858 shortly before they immigrated to the coal mining country of Ohio, and although they had signed the marriage registry with an X, McPhee said, “they could certainly talk.” He believes the family’s Celtic verballity came with them from Scotland. “There’s not so much difference between the Scots and the Irish,” McPhee said, “except that the Scots are responsible.”

John Angus McPhee was born on March 8, 1931. His parents’ house stood on the edge of Princeton, New Jersey, with fields and woods beyond it. McPhee spent his childhood biking around campus and attending football and basketball practices with his father. When he was eight and nine years old, he wore

a Princeton football shirt and ran around at the games retrieving the ball after extra points and serving as the team mascot. When older, he practiced with the Princeton basketball team. “I grew up among the various sports,” McPhee said. “That’s all I cared about until I finished high school.”

McPhee’s life has been centered in Princeton. As a boy, the president of the university knew him by name. The elementary school he attended at 185 Nassau Street was purchased by the university and now houses the creative writing program where McPhee teaches. During World War II, McPhee was an air spotter. He watched for enemy aircraft from a little hut on high ground and phoned in the sightings to New York. In high school, he shot baskets in the backyard instead of doing homework, but he also encountered teachers who had a profound influence on his work.

One was Olive McKee, who taught him English for three years in high school. She assigned three pieces of writing a week. “I feel a large and considerable debt to her,” he said. “Every piece of writing you turned in had to have a piece of paper on top of it showing the structure. In her case, it was Roman numerals and that kind of thing.” As Ferris Professor at Princeton, teaching one writing course a year, he has adopted her techniques. “When I assign structural outlines with my students, it can be a drawing, but they have to show that they have an idea of the internal structure of the piece.”

McPhee applied to only one college—Princeton University—and was accepted. Because he was barely seventeen and had grown up in the same town, his parents sent him to Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts for an additional year of study before he entered college. There he was taught by Mrs. Helen Boyden in chemistry, Frank Conklin in geology, and Robert McGlynn in English (“He got me excited about reading in a way I’d never been before”).

He also discovered Frank Boyden, who would become the subject of *The Headmaster*. The book had a sentimental tone, appropriate for a former Deerfield boy writing about the headmaster at age eighty-six. Boyden left his mark on the boys in the form of ethical standards, not academics. “His first-hand relationship with his boys has always been extraordinary,” McPhee wrote, “and Deerfield students for sixty years have

been characterized by the high degree of ethical sensitivity that he has been able to awaken in them.” Boyden’s ethics seem to have stuck to McPhee.



John McPhee photo from the 1948-49 Deerfield Academy Varsity Basketball team. Behind McPhee stands Headmaster Frank L. Boyden. (Deerfield Academy Archives, 1949 Pocumtuck yearbook.)

At Princeton with the class of 1953, McPhee entered the creative writing program headed by Richard Blackmur. McPhee

spent his sophomore and junior years in the program, studying with Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, and Tom Riggs. He proposed to write a novel for his senior thesis. "I was an English major and they wouldn't hear of it. I argued all over the place and they finally let me do it."

Having decided at an early age to be a writer, and wanting from the age of eighteen to write for *The New Yorker*, McPhee was not completely satisfied with the fiction program. "If you go back into the years when I was writing a novel for a senior thesis, I was also writing factual articles every week. Princeton had a feast of undergraduate publications, and any young writer ought to know that when you're in college you have an unparalleled opportunity to publish things, see yourself in print, see what it's like, grow in it. That's going to stop dead as a door-nail the day you graduate."

McPhee worked for the *Nassau Sovereign*, the *Daily Princetonian*, the *Princeton Tiger*, and the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. In his senior year he wrote a one-page essay every week for the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* and was paid for it. He remembers it as "the single best piece of training I had as an undergraduate."

As editor of *The Princeton Tiger*, McPhee created an imitation of *The New Yorker*, complete with a front section called "Spires and Gargoyles" that looked like "Talk of the Town." This issue caught the eye of a *New York Times Magazine* editor, who asked McPhee for an article about college humor publications. This became his first professional piece of writing, full of adolescent barbs at the other humor magazines. It ran in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1952 alongside a response by the Yale humor editor.

After graduation, McPhee began a journey he once compared with a river trip. "When a person is 21 or 22 years old and facing that great enigma about what to do, envying the law students or medical students who can get on a set of rails and run on it and know where they're going, the writer doesn't know. But a writer should also bear in mind there are numerous paths to this goal and they're all O.K. It's like a huge river with a lot of islands in it. You can go around an island to the left or right. You can go to this or that island. You might get into an

eddy. But you're still in the river. You're going to get there. If the person expects the big answer at 21, that's ridiculous. Everyone's in the dark." McPhee's path to his lifelong goal of becoming a writer took several turns.

First, he went to Cambridge University for a year of post-graduate study in English, and while there he played basketball and worked as a stringer for *Time* magazine. Returning to New York, he tried free-lancing and wrote short stories. One day he had an opportunity to watch rehearsals for a live television show in a warehouse on the Upper West Side. Without pay, McPhee watched weeks of rehearsals for "Robert Montgomery Presents," read old scripts, and began writing his own one-hour television plays, two of which were produced. For a while he wrote speeches for W. R. Grace & Company, a Wall Street firm, and did articles for the company magazine.

McPhee steadily submitted articles to *The New Yorker*, and even interviewed for a position as a "Talk of the Town" reporter. Nothing happened. In the meantime, he took a job writing for a mimeographed house organ called *FYI* at Time-Life. He moved up to the main magazine and stayed at *Time* seven years writing in the "Hemisphere" section and "back of the book" articles about people, art, show business, religion, education, and books. He wrote nine cover stories, including profiles of Joan Baez, Richard Burton, Jackie Gleason, Jean Kerr, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, Sophia Loren, Mort Sahl, and Barbra Streisand, as well as the cover story on the 1964 New York World's Fair. But he didn't want to remain at *Time* indefinitely.

He wrote short stories that were published in *Playboy*, *Reporter* magazine, and the *Transatlantic Review*. He wrote articles, poetry, and short stories in his free time. One day Harold Hayes, editor of *Esquire*, agreed that McPhee would write an article about playing basketball in England during his postgraduate year at Cambridge. "I wrote the piece and sent it to him. He said he didn't want it. He was sorry but it disappointed him. I thought, 'Hoooo!'" McPhee said, waving his arm in the air as if to banish the memory. "I was so depressed. Then *The New Yorker* bought it"—his first piece in that magazine. "Basketball and Beefeaters" appeared in 1963. "It didn't make any difference," McPhee said. "I went on

working at *Time*. It was the Bradley piece that changed my life.”

As a freshman at Princeton, Bill Bradley, a six-foot-five basketball player from Crystal City, Missouri, had impressed the team doctor. One winter day in 1962, McPhee’s father called him in New York. “There’s a freshman basketball player down here who is the best basketball player who has ever been near here and may be one of the best ever,” Dr. McPhee said. “You ought to come down and see him.” At the freshman game the next night against Pennsylvania, the stands were filled and his father was holding a seat for him. Three years later, “A Sense of Where You Are” appeared in *The New Yorker*, a piece that made McPhee’s career. 1965 was a good year for Bradley, too. He was named All-America, led his Ivy League team into the Final Four of the NCAA tournament, was named most valuable player in the tournament, and was the No. 1 draft choice of the New York Knicks, but turned down their lucrative offer in favor of a Rhodes Scholarship.

McPhee’s profile used Bradley’s skills, his dedication, and fan reactions to create the image of a superior basketball player. Bradley showed McPhee that the seemingly impossible—shooting without looking at the basket—was only a matter of practice, something Bradley had seen Oscar Robertson and Jerry West do many times. Bradley tossed the ball into the basket while looking McPhee in the eye, and then did it again. “The shot has the essential characteristics of a wild accident,” McPhee wrote, “which is what many people stubbornly think they have witnessed until they see him do it for the third time in a row.” After you’ve played the game a while, Bradley explained, “You develop a sense of where you are.”

McPhee published *A Sense of Where You Are* in 1965. Bill Bradley would later play for the NBA champion New York Knicks, was elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1982, became a United States Senator from New Jersey and was frequently mentioned as a possible presidential candidate. “The title of McPhee’s book, *A Sense of Where You Are*, applies to both Bradley’s play on the court and his life off the court,” wrote critic James N. Stull. “In other words, Bradley has a

sense of self, purpose, and direction in life, and this is true of almost all of McPhee's admirable subjects." McPhee followed up with a series of profiles for *The New Yorker*. First came "The Headmaster" (1966), a profile of Frank L. Boyden, headmaster of Deerfield Academy, followed by "A Roomful of Hovings" (1967), which focused on Thomas Hoving, director-elect of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He published shorter profiles of Euell Gibbons, an expert on edible wild foods and the author of *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, and Robert Twynam, who grew the grass on Wimbledon's tennis courts. These profiles had complex inner structures, but they were focused on a single person.

Sitting one day in his office in the East Pyne Building at Princeton, McPhee drew on a blank piece of paper a structural pattern he was thinking about after he completed those profiles. "What developed in my mind for a long while was, 'What if you did the same thing with two people?' If you found two people and did all that for each of them, then things would start going back and forth in there." On the paper he drew the two individuals, each surrounded by dots representing the satellite figures in their lives—their friends, teachers, opponents, colleagues. He drew lines rebounding back and forth among the dots. He calls this kind of planned structure "the single most important thing for me, other than the final writing itself." Each of McPhee's books has an architectonic plan; internally each book has a design that would impress Olive McKee.

"One plus one just might add up to more than two," McPhee said. "I had this in my mind and I wondered just who these people might be. An architect and his client? An actor and a director? A pitcher and a manager? One day I was watching television, and there were Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner in the semifinals of the first United States Open Tennis Championship at Forest Hills. Each twenty-five years old. Each an American. So they'd have to know each other very well because you could put all the good tennis players in the country in this room."

McPhee sat down with Ashe and Graebner and watched a film of the match over and over as each of them described his thoughts and feelings. The result was *Levels of the Game*

(1969), a profile of two men, filled with portraits of their parents and coaches, and multiple viewpoints on their development as players.

“When *Levels of the Game* worked out,” McPhee said, “I got ambitious and thought, ‘Well, if it works for two, how about more?’” He put a diagram on his wall that looked like this:

$$\frac{ABC}{D}$$

The plan was to let one person, D, relate to the other three. “This is not a promising way to develop a piece of writing,” McPhee admitted. “You don’t do it backwards. This is an exception. I had no idea what the basic subject would be here, when this was already up on my bulletin board. But I’m interested in outdoor things and the conservation movement was starting up—this was in 1968. I went to Washington for two weeks, and went around talking to people in conservation organizations and to their ‘natural enemies,’ as I put it eventually. That’s how *Encounters with the Archdruid* [1971] started out.”

The pivotal figure in McPhee’s structural plan became David Brower, head of a conservation group called Friends of the Earth and former executive director of the Sierra Club. Brower’s natural enemies were Charles Park, a geologist and mineral engineer who wanted to dig an open pit copper mine in the Glacier Peak Wilderness; Charles Fraser, a land developer with plans for a resort on Cumberland Island, Georgia; and Floyd Dominy, Commissioner of Reclamation, who wanted dams built in the Grand Canyon.

The tensions between these men were balanced by McPhee’s even-tempered, objective portrayal of their opinions. Brower goes hiking with Park. He stays on Fraser’s yacht off Cumberland Island and helps him review environmentally sensitive development plans. He rides a raft down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon with Dominy. McPhee launched the participants on those encounters so he would have a narrative and something to describe. “Participation is a way of finding a narrative,” he said, “a way to find something more interesting

to report than a Playboy interview.” Literary critic James Stull added, “McPhee may assume, as well, the roles of limited participant, foil to more knowledgeable informants, and translator of arcane material to an intelligent but uninformed audience, but his most critical role is that of witness to his subjects’ performances, which centers almost exclusively around their commitment to a job or calling.”

Structure has been an important tool in McPhee’s hands. He works with graphic internal structures in mind—a lower-case e in “Travels in Georgia,” an articulated Y in “A Roomful of Hovings,” and other drawings that have been pinned to his bulletin board during composition. These planned patterns create solutions to the problems that any nonfiction writing project can present. In *Levels of the Game* and *Encounters with the Archdruid* he created the external structures before he reported the real events. He imagined the structure, then went out and found Graebner and Ashe, and later Brower and his “natural enemies.” Of all the “absolutely legitimate” tools a nonfiction writer can use, including narrative, dialogue, character sketching, and metaphor, McPhee emphasizes structural innovation. He has a certain freedom of choice in his use of these tools. He is writing about “real people in real places,” as he always reminds interviewers, and is limited by the demands of nonfiction form, but he selects the events he writes about and sometimes, as in sending David Brower down the Colorado River with Floyd Dominy, he creates the events as well. The real people and real places are out there, but McPhee must turn nature to literature before we can read about them.

After “A Sense of Where You Are” appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965, editor William Shawn named McPhee a staff writer. McPhee had achieved his goal. He held one of the most coveted positions in journalism. McPhee’s writing had achieved the grace and fluidity that he described in Bradley’s basketball game. Although he preferred to stand in the shadows as a narrator, McPhee still had a distinctive voice and total control over his narrative. Years later, in his living room in Princeton, McPhee thought back to the rush of energy that followed his arrival at *The New Yorker*: “The next thing I did was to get up some ideas. I actually started work on three or four things lined

up in a row. One was *The Headmaster*, one was *Oranges*, one was *The Pine Barrens*.”

Although a short book, *Oranges* (1967) demonstrated the literary power of solid research wedded to interesting characters and a limited involvement of the narrator. McPhee used a similar pattern in *The Pine Barrens* (1968), *Coming into the Country* (1977), and his four geology books.

“*Oranges* was a whim,” McPhee said, “the result of a machine at Pennsylvania Station in New York where I went every day when I was commuting. I drank this orange juice and I noticed weird things. Fresh orange juice changes color across the winter. I saw an ad in a magazine that showed four or five identical-looking oranges with different names: Parson Brown, Hamlin, Valencia. I thought, ‘That’s interesting. Maybe it would make a good short piece—go down there for four or five days, talk to growers and nurserymen and go home. Write a little piece.’ What made *Oranges* longer was when I stumbled into the Citrus Experiment Station at Lake Alfred, where they had forty-four thousand items in their library—books and papers about oranges—and they had men and women in white coats walking around who had Ph.D.’s in oranges. One had a heart-lung machine with oranges breathing in and out of it. I discovered the history of citrus, migrating westward along with the migrations of human-kind itself. I scarcely suspected I would learn anything like that. But when I did, it was interesting and I went into it, so it was a longish article.”

McPhee proved he could write an interesting narrative about something as commonplace as oranges. *Oranges* combined the information he discovered at the experiment station in Florida with a narrative that made it fun. The narrative grew from McPhee’s search for a delicious glass of fresh-squeezed juice. Instead of fresh juice, he found an industry in love with concentrate. The science of orange juice concentrate led him to the experiment station and its library. He went to a plant where fresh juice was reduced to concentrate. “When the evaporators are finished with the juice, it has a nice orange color and seems promising, but if it is reconstituted into ‘orange juice’ it tastes like a glass of water with two teaspoons of sugar and one aspirin dissolved in it,” he wrote. McPhee

finally got his glass of fresh orange juice from a conveyor belt moments before high-season Valencia juice entered an evaporator.

While dealing with tons of information about oranges, McPhee started looking for literary tools that would support the weight. One device that carries information in a narrative McPhee calls a “set piece.” In *Oranges*, McPhee rides into a grove on the back of a tractor, and two pages later the reader is off on a set piece about the history of oranges, starting with the evolution of citrus in the Malay Archipelago about twenty million years ago and moving forward to orange trees in the Holy Land. It is a stylish prose trip, there on the back of the tractor, but it is set apart as a digression from the narrative. Eventually, each set piece in the book returns to the original narrative.

His miniature portrait of oranges grew into what McPhee calls a “broad canvas” containing a wealth of scientific research, historical sweep, character studies, and personal narrative. The canvas grew to regional proportions when McPhee took on the Pine Barrens, a wild, sandy area encompassing hundreds of square miles of New Jersey that is famous for its abundant water supply and fabled residents. Writing about a regional culture proved daunting.

“I wandered around talking to all kinds of people and I had no idea what to make of it. I hadn’t done it before.” Pointing to the yard outside his living room windows, McPhee said, “I spent two weeks on a picnic table right outside the window here lying on my back in agony and despair, staring up into the trees. I had no idea how I was going to tell the story of the Pine Barrens. I had miscellaneous stuff, sketches of people. Nowadays I would have an idea what to do with it.”

The Pine Barrens opened with his first visit to Fred Brown, resident of Hog Wallow. Fred Brown had no phone, no electricity. His yard was littered with eight cars, old vacuum cleaners, radios, cranberry boxes, “and maybe a thousand other things.” He cooked McPhee a pork chop on a gas stove. McPhee wrote: “He asked where I was going, and I said that I had no particular destination, explaining that I was in the pines because I found it hard to believe that so much unbroken forest

could still exist so near the big Eastern cities, and I wanted to see it while it was still there. 'Is that so?' he said, three times. Like many people in the pines, he often says things three times. 'Is that so? Is that so?'"

McPhee asked Fred Brown's permission to fill his jerry can at the pump in the front yard. "'Hell, yes,' he said. 'That isn't my water. That's God's water. That's God's water. That right, Bill?'" Bill Wasovwich, Brown's friend and neighbor, was also sitting in the kitchen at the time, although he was such a shy person you might not notice him.

"'I guess so,' Bill said, without looking up. 'It's good water, I can tell you that.'

"'That's God's water,' Fred said again. 'Take all you want.'"

Fred and Bill became McPhee's central characters and guides to the history and geography of the Pine Barrens. He drove the sandy terrain on unpaved, unmarked roads with them, constantly scribbling in his notebook. One time McPhee said he was driving and Fred Brown said something interesting. McPhee slammed on the brakes and started writing in his notebook. "Fred," McPhee asked, "do you know what I'm doing?"

"No," Fred said, "and I don't think you do either."

McPhee's hosts came to symbolize the native Pineys, a shy, self-sufficient, and maligned people. Never one to editorialize, McPhee nevertheless left his position clear in *The Pine Barrens*: "They are apparently a tolerant people, with an attractive spirit of live and let live. They seem to like hard work, if not steady work, and they like to brag about working hard. When they say they will do something, they do it. They seem shy, like the people who went before them, but when they get to know an outsider they are not shy and will generously share their tables, which often include new-potato stews and cranberry potpies."

By the mid-1970s, three clear structural patterns formed in McPhee's books. First, he developed profiles of strong characters such as Bill Bradley, Thomas Hoving, and David Brower. Since then McPhee has used profiles of single

characters in several articles. *The Curve of Binding Energy* (1974), which was about physicist Theodore Taylor; *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* (1975), featuring Henri Vaillancourt, an artist and craftsman who builds authentic birchbark canoes; and *The Ransom of Russian Art* (1995), focused on Norton Dodge, who collected dissident Soviet art, are all built around central characters. "Above all else," wrote James Stull, "McPhee's subjects are indeed expert craftspeople who demonstrate competence and an unparalleled skill that enables them to function successfully in their respective worlds, whether it be school-mastering, tennis, basketball, cooking, or geology." McPhee shares that commitment to craftsmanship that we find in his characters, according to Stull.

The other two patterns grew from *Oranges*. It was the first regional portrait, which he would further develop in *The Pine Barrens* and later in his best-selling book about Alaska, *Coming into the Country*. "Each a broad canvas, lots of people, lots of history and science," McPhee said of these books. *Oranges* also began a series of books dominated by scientific concerns, including his geology books. There was considerable overlap among all three structural patterns, of course.

In the world of literary journalists, McPhee belongs in the realist camp with writers such as Tom Wolfe and Tracy Kidder, who attempt to represent a real world for the reader, as opposed to focusing on the process of storytelling as a way of creating reality. Realists have faith in the capability of traditional models of interpretation and expression to reveal the real. Although the reports acknowledge cultural relativism in their attention to the symbolic worlds of their subjects, this awareness is not extended to the process of reporting, which is treated as a natural process. If McPhee can understand a real world and the real people in it, he feels capable of bringing that world to the reader.

McPhee's literary journalism has a genealogy that includes Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, and in this century such writers as Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, A. J. Liebling, John Hersey, and Lillian Ross. McPhee has used increasingly complicated structures in his work while retaining a strict regard for realist assumptions about

journalism. Ronald Weber, whose scholarly work has examined literary journalism from Hemingway to the New Journalists of the 1960s, writes of McPhee's *Coming into the Country*, "The book's roots lie not so much in the effort to emulate the novel as in the attempt to extend the range of journalism while remaining within journalistic forms."

Until recently the literary qualities of nonfiction have been ignored by literary critics in favor of fiction and playwriting. McPhee, who has written plays and short fiction, was drawn to nonfiction by its literary possibilities. "Remember the possibilities in nonfiction writing," he said in an interview, "the character sketching that stops well short of illegitimate invention. There's plenty of room for invention, for 'creativity,' stopping well short of invading a number of things that only fiction can do. You can use fictional techniques: narrative, dialogue, character sketching, description, metaphor. Above all metaphor.

"Things that are cheap and tawdry in fiction work beautifully in nonfiction because they are true. That's why you should be careful not to abridge it, because it's the fundamental power you're dealing with. You arrange it and present it. There's lots of artistry. But you don't make it up.

"Nobody's making rules that cover everybody. The nonfiction writer is communicating with the reader about real people in real places. So if those people talk, you say what those people said. You don't say what the writer decides they said. I get prickly if someone suggests there's dialogue in my pieces that I didn't get from the source. You don't make up dialogue. You don't make a composite character. Where I came from, a composite character was fiction. So when somebody makes a nonfiction character out of three people who are real, that is a fictional character in my opinion. And you don't get inside their heads and think for them. You can't interview the dead. You could make a list of the things you don't do. Where writers abridge that, they hitchhike on the credibility of writers who don't."

McPhee's most financially successful work has been *Coming into the Country* (1977), a regional portrait of epic proportions. Published in *The New Yorker* in eight parts, it

actually told three separate stories.

The first story told of a canoe and kayak trip in Arctic Alaska on the Salmon and Kobuk rivers. In the second story, McPhee accompanied a commission looking for a site for a new Alaskan capital. He went to Alaska for the first time in the summer and early fall of 1975, during which time he conducted the research for the first two stories. The third story took longer. He went back to Alaska in the spring of 1976 at breakup time and stayed into the summer in the towns of Eagle, Circle, and Central, Alaska, in the Upper Yukon country northeast of Fairbanks. He returned during the winter of 1977.

Coming into the Country sealed McPhee's reputation as one of the premier nature and cultural writers in America. Writing in *The New York Times*, John Leonard said the book left him enchanted, dreaming of seal oil, caribou, the Yukon River, and grizzly bears:

The time may come when nobody goes outside, when every American stays home in his 'living center,' his computerized cocoon, a bionic junkie with programmed dreams. And if it ever occurs to this sloth to wonder about the outside, about what the outside was like when there was an outside, why, all he will have to do is plug a cartridge into his communications console and read, if he can read, a book on his wraparound television screen. The book could be by John McPhee, or Edward Hoagland, or Edward Abbey, or Josephine Johnson—one of the people, anyway, who do our living for us. Remember, the book will say, when there were seasons?

Edward Hoagland called *Coming into the Country* a "masterpiece." He said McPhee must have been looking for a "big, long, permanent book, written while he was still in the midst of life and could go after it, because in peripatetic journalism such as McPhee's there is an adventurous, fortuitous element: where the writer gets himself and what he stumbles on."

In the third section of the book, McPhee lived among the

residents of the Upper Yukon country. These people came to Alaska, like many others, looking for gold, the challenge of survival, and land where they could build a cabin. The weather drives most of them away. Ed and Ginny Gelvin, who raised four children in the country, have taken their existence from Alaska in the modern age. Flying above the wilderness in their bush planes and studying old mining records, Ed and his son Stanley located a stream that might contain a placer deposit of gold. The Gelvins wanted to move thousands of tons of gravel, so they drove the largest bulldozer Caterpillar makes into the wilderness. They choked the stream and created a reservoir. They bulldozed forty thousand cubic yards of gold-bearing gravels into a metal sluice box and washed it through using a plume of water. This ecological disturbance was witnessed by McPhee the conservationist:

Am I disgusted? Manifestly not. Not from here, from now, from this perspective. I am too warmly, too subjectively caught up in what the Gelvins are doing. In the ecomilitia, bust me to private. This mine is a cork on the sea. Meanwhile (and, possibly, more seriously), the relationship between this father and son is as attractive as anything I have seen in Alaska—both of them self-reliant beyond the usual reach of the term, the characteristic formed by this country. Whatever they are doing, whether it is mining or something else, they do for themselves what no one else is here to do for them. Their kind is more endangered every year. Balance that against the nick they are making in this land. Only an easygoing extremist would preserve every bit of the country. And extremists alone would exploit it all. Everyone else has to think the matter through—choose a point of tolerance, however much the point might tend to one side. For myself, I am closer to the preserving side—that is, the side that would preserve the Gelvins. To be sure, I would preserve plenty of land as well. My own margin of tolerance would not include some

faceless corporation “responsible” to a hundred thousand stockholders, making a crater you could see from the moon.

McPhee located two modern-day pioneers, Dick Cook and Donna Kneeland, living ten miles up a stream on a subsistence diet of homegrown vegetables, moose, and fish. Their lives challenged some of McPhee’s personal values and his ideals about wilderness. Cook was an expert in the survival skills needed for backwoods life. They left the door open when they were gone so grizzlies would make less of a mess getting into the place. “Bears are on my mind today,” McPhee wrote, because the next day he had to hike out alone to the Yukon River, where he would be picked up by a boat. He had been “strongly counseled” not to go into the woods without a gun. “Having never hunted, I have almost no knowledge of guns,” he wrote, and turned down the offer of a gun. On the hike into the cabin, they passed bear scat. Every bear story McPhee had ever heard rushed through his mind. Once again, Alaska tested his conservationist values:

Here I am about to walk through the woods the distance merely from Times Square to LaGuardia Airport and I am ionized with anticipation—catastrophic anticipation. I may never resolve my question of bears—the extent to which I exaggerate the danger, the extent of the foolishness of those who go unarmed. The effect of it all, for the moment, is a slight but detectable migration of my internal affections from the sneaker toward the bazooka, from the National Wildlife Federation toward the National Rifle Association—an annoying touch of panic in a bright and blazing day.

Dick Cook does not help McPhee’s confidence when he tells him to remember that “the woods are composed of who’s killing whom. Life is forever building from death. Life and death are not a duality.” McPhee begins his two-hour hike to the Yukon River through closed-in willow thickets and soft

muskeg. He thinks:

I can't accept anymore the rationale of the few who go unarmed, yet I am equally loath to use guns. If bears were no longer in the country, I would not have come. I am here, in a sense, because they survive. So I am sorry—truly rueful and perplexed—that without a means of killing them I cannot feel at ease.

Grizzly bears fishing in distant streams, placer mines gouged from the wilderness, gardens planted with “grass” and rhubarb, a dogsled sounding over dry snow like “the rumbling cars of a long freight,” the sun shining at 11:00 p.m., these things are the real Alaska and emblematic at the same time. James Stull wrote: “While McPhee does write about some of the most pressing environmental concerns of his time, when we consider his fondness for wilderness and rural settings and timeless, out-of-the-way places, as well as the prototypical individuals who populate his world—individuals who are competent, trustworthy, and morally good—we enter a semi-idealized realm that reflects, more generally, McPhee the author's private vision of the world.” Donald Hall, writing in *National Review* (March 31, 1978), said, “It makes no difference what McPhee writes about; his subjects are irrelevant; we love him for his form. Oh, how he can shift his feet! Transitions are the niftiest things he does, moving from past into present, from present into past, shifting abruptly from one scene or set of characters to another.”

McPhee says he spends a lot of time not writing those graceful transitions; instead he allows his structures to juxtapose elements that need no bridges to link them together. “Two parts of a piece of writing, merely by lying side-by-side, can comment on each other without a word spoken,” he said.

McPhee's early study of the surface features of the earth at Deerfield Academy, and his work on *Oranges*, *The Pine Barrens*, and *Coming into the Country* prepared him for the longest-running project of his career—four books on the geology of North America. In part, it began when Princeton

geologist Ken Deffeyes answered a couple questions McPhee had about how gold got into the mountains of Alaska. Later, McPhee called Deffeyes again. As a topic for a short “Talk of the Town” piece in *The New Yorker*, McPhee asked if Deffeyes could help him find a road cut outside New York City and describe what the world looked like when the rocks formed. Before the conversation ended, McPhee and Deffeyes had planned a trip westward across the whole country looking at road cuts. “The next thing I know I’m in a pickup with Deffeyes in Nevada,” McPhee said.

At one level, his geology books deal with a twentieth century scientific revolution, the theory of plate tectonics and continental drift. “Ten years after plate tectonics came along, it was still very much controversial. I wanted to see how this science had settled down with its new theory,” McPhee explained. He envisioned a book about the geology of North America, using road cuts of Interstate 80 as windows into the rock. Soon enough, he discovered the project would take fifteen years and four books to complete.

The first geology book, *Basin and Range* (1981), presents the theory of plate tectonics, and is a primer in the modern geological sciences. The second book, *In Suspect Terrain* (1983), turns to Anita Harris, a geologist “who’s clawing at the theory—not totally disbelieving but irritated with the gross extrapolations onto the continent of plate tectonic ideas to a point where they become, in her view, almost imaginative.” In the third book, *Rising from the Plains* (1986), McPhee concentrates on Wyoming and the dean of Rocky Mountain geology, David Love. The scientific focus is on the story of the building, burial, and exhumation of the Rocky Mountains. Love struggles with controversial topics in environmental geology and the economics of minerals, oil, gas, and uranium until, in McPhee’s view, he becomes a one-man *Encounters with the Archdruid*. The human focus is on Love and his mother, a woman who had arrived from the East three-quarters of a century earlier. She had kept a journal in an articulate voice, and Love permitted McPhee to quote extensively from it in *Rising from the Plains*. The human characters here seem a match for the monumental geology.

McPhee and his wife Yolanda sometimes do readings from the book with Yolanda reading the parts written by Mrs. Love. The fourth book in the series, *Assembling California* (1993), is about “the only place where this continent has a plate boundary on dry land.”*

McPhee’s best-selling books have been *Coming into the Country* and *The Control of Nature* (1989), followed by the geology books. The geology books have been widely adopted in college courses because they clarify a murky subject. Most readers, according to McPhee, are not students or trained scientists, and they do not necessarily have scientific interests. But they can absorb a scientific narrative and appreciate it. A topic like geology, full of academic terms and complicated scientific theories, proved perfect for McPhee’s approach to writing. He loves facts and the sound of names like paleozoic. More importantly, he allows individuals like David Love and Ken Deffeyes to represent and explain the theories. Love, for example, insisted on looking at rocks in the field, rather than just using computer models of geology. James Stull said, “Love’s concern for first-hand experience with what he theorizes and writes about reflects McPhee’s own belief in the primacy of experience. Witnessing the performances of his subjects enables McPhee the journalist to establish authority while simultaneously marveling at their ability both to perform a given task and navigate (see) their way through the world.”

“One of the frustrations in it,” McPhee said, “is that a writer who seeks the multiple possibilities in a piece of nonfiction writing—character sketching and narrative and dialogue and description—is not well served by a subject like geology, which is extraordinarily demanding in one principal area: description. The pressure, the weight, and the opportunity in description are just out of proportion with everything else. This permits sentences to march along in ways that would seem inappropriate in other forms of writing, but are appropriate to the earth itself.”

The reviewers fell into two camps: some felt geology was large and difficult enough to be worthy of McPhee’s talents;

* Note: In 1998, McPhee published another geology book, *Annals of the Former World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), a collection of five books that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1999.

others were simply bored. Evan Connell wrote a review of *Rising from the Plains* in which he appreciated McPhee's characters and natural description, but then concluded, "You need not have passed Geology 101 to enjoy 'Rising From the Plains,' but it might help." Herbert Mitgang, writing in *The New York Times* (November 10, 1986), marveled at McPhee's handling of complex material:

It would almost be unfair to make notes while reading one of John McPhee's fascinating books that explore some out-of-the-way corner of the American landscape and its inhabitants. They are comparable to Joseph Mitchell's model writing on the Mohawk Indians or the bottom of New York Harbor or any other subject that he has mined for nuggets of information. Among professional writers, there is an added pleasure in watching how authors in their class construct their factual narratives. By covering New York and America like some foreign country, they set a very high standard of originality for writers and readers.

McPhee's oldest daughter, Laura, said the geology project—spanning fifteen years of scientific inquiry, struggle with descriptions, and some negative criticism—has had a powerful influence on McPhee. "The geology made him think about his own mortality and how brief human life is in relation to the earth," she said.

"It's the only piece of ground that we're ever going to inhabit," McPhee said simply. "I know that my own reflections on living and on being here changed considerably in the past few years. It's a perspective on our own position as a species with respect to space and time." McPhee looked up at the world geologic map on his wall for a moment. "Dammit, it's the only house we're ever going to have," he said emphatically. "It is some interesting thing, this earth and how it works. I could be somewhat evangelical about ideas in geology. I am permitted to talk about it at home ten minutes a day and no more. That's pretty rigid."

McPhee's most spectacular and popular book on natural subjects has been *The Control of Nature*. In it, he deals with the vast forces of geomorphology that shape the earth's surface, the Mississippi River, volcanoes in Iceland and Hawaii, and the erosion of the San Gabriel Mountains near Los Angeles. These forces are also reshaping human communities, and we are trying to control them.

McPhee begins 300 miles upriver from New Orleans where a distributary called the Atchafalaya River draws off 30 percent of the water from the main river. The remainder of the Mississippi River continues down toward New Orleans, through the "American Ruhr," an industrial district of great importance to the nation. The Atchafalaya, however, reaches the Gulf in only 145 miles and has a steeper gradient than the main river. The Atchafalaya wants to change the course of the Mississippi, as has happened many times during the formation of the Louisiana delta, but this time human industry hangs in the balance. In 1963, the Army Corps of Engineers built a control structure at the source of the Atchafalaya to maintain a constant 30 percent flow into the Atchafalaya and to guarantee that the main river would continue flowing toward New Orleans.

The drama of McPhee's story grows from the forceful patience of nature, which will keep trying to take the shortest route to the Gulf. In conflict, McPhee casts poor Morgan City, Louisiana, sitting in a subsiding landscape beside the Atchafalaya like a tumbler in a sink. If the Atchafalaya rises, Morgan City may drown while industries fail beside a dry riverbed near New Orleans. Controlling the Mississippi River would prove difficult. McPhee follows the river until his readers grasp the whole system of control on the Mississippi from the first levee the river encounters down to the control structure at the Atchafalaya. Readers grasp that the river is stronger than we are. The Army Corps of Engineers keep holding back the river, as they did in the flood of 1973. But when the hundred-year flood hits—the "design flood" engineers expect would destroy the works—three million cubic feet of water per second will have its way. Or maybe not. McPhee comes close to prediction, but keeps one step away. Maybe the Corps of Engineers will win a few more battles in this war.

Other fights between poorly armed humans and the elite forces of nature are seen when Hawaiians and the residents of Iceland try to keep red-hot lava flows out of their towns. In Los Angeles, suburbanites have moved up into the San Gabriel Mountains, one of the most shattered, most rapidly rising, and most rapidly eroding mountain ranges on earth. When winter rains bring five or ten inches of water in a deluge, rock from the mountains washes down in huge, muddy debris flows. The flows rampage the newly built neighborhoods.

The Corps of Engineers trying to defeat the Atchafalaya's capture of the Mississippi River, Icelanders turning fire hoses on a lava flow, and the City of Los Angeles trying to hold back the San Gabriel Mountains possess the same symbolism. In a later work, *Looking for a Ship*, McPhee quoted Captain Paul Washburn of the United States Merchant Marine, who said it best: "Anywhere in the world, if you fool with Mother Nature she's going to get you. This is not a political statement. It is just a fact." McPhee's geology books use the drift of crustal plates about the globe as a central theme. *The Control of Nature* deals with the generally uncontrollable forces that have shaped the surface of the earth. California suburbanites, living near a crustal plate boundary, try to keep debris slides out of their bedrooms. These struggles, although sometimes misguided or unnecessary, are monumental in their methods.

A geologist looking at McPhee's life would find one large fault line and many layers of sedimentation. He has lived in the same rambling, two-story house in Princeton township since 1963, when he was working at *Time* magazine. Four daughters from his first marriage grew up in the house. McPhee and his first wife, Pryde Brown, were divorced in the late 1960s. In 1972 McPhee married Yolanda Whitman, who had four children by her first marriage. Evidence of the children fills the house and competes for space with souvenirs of McPhee's writing projects—maps of the St. John-Allagash Wilderness and Alaska, an Eastern coyote pelt from Maine, a chart of the structures associated with colliding crustal plates.

The New Yorker since 1965 has given McPhee a remarkable degree of freedom. He writes whatever interests

him and is paid only for what the magazine publishes. He is not treated as a full-time staff writer with a W-2 tax form, but instead gets treated more like a free-lance writer. While this arrangement offers freedom, it provides what he calls “the financial security of a farmer.” His ties to *The New Yorker* seem to have been altered since Tina Brown became editor. The new emphasis on contemporary affairs gives the offices of *The New Yorker* the feel of *Time Magazine* when everyone was working on an airplane crash story, McPhee once said. And as Edward Hoagland once suggested, it is hard to imagine McPhee taking up another project as demanding as *Coming into the Country*. The magazine no longer publishes the eight-part article that once brought *Coming into the Country* to its readers. McPhee has always been active and appears in great physical shape. While capable of paddling a canoe all day or knocking samples out of a rock formation, he is unlikely to leave Princeton for a year in Alaska.

In his latest work, *The Ransom of Russian Art* (1994), McPhee takes the unusual stance of an investigative reporter. He grills art collector Norton Dodge on his connections with the C.I.A., asks how he smuggled 9,000 pieces of art out of the Soviet Union, and inquires where a college professor got \$3 million to pay for this enterprise. When he doesn't get a wholly satisfactory answer, McPhee goes to some unnamed sources in the C.I.A. for verification of certain facts.

Yet his ties to *The New Yorker* endure. Above all, he told me, he wants to keep writing: “Writing is like a river meandering along. It won't through time stay in the same banks. It cuts out new things and fills in other places. Sometimes it jumps across its own meanders. You wonder what you're going to be doing ten or fifteen years hence.

“You might say my ambition is to write—as little as possible! My daughter Jenny tells me I overdo the negative aspects. I grunt and groan about how horrible it is and how difficult the whole process is without talking about the good parts. In general, I do not wish to be writing anything different in genre than what I'm writing now. My ambition is to keep on writing.”

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