

The Literary Journalists

by Norman Sims

Originally published as the introduction to *The Literary Journalists*
(Ballantine, 1984) Copyright ©1984

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.
—John McPhee

For years, reporters have pursued their craft by sitting down near centers of power—the Pentagon, the White House, Wall Street. Like hounds by the dinner table, they have waited for scraps of information to fall from Washington, from New York and from their beats at the court house, city hall, and the police station.

Today, scraps of information don't satisfy the reader's desire to learn about people doing things. Readers deal in their private lives with psychological explanations for events around them. They may live in complex social worlds, amid advanced technologies, where "the facts" only begin to explain what's happening. The everyday stories that bring us inside the lives of our neighbors used to be found in the realm of the fiction writer, while nonfiction reporters brought us the news from far-off centers of power that hardly touched our lives.

Literary journalists unite the two forms. Reporting on the lives of people at work, in love, going about the normal rounds of life, they confirm that the crucial moments of everyday life contain great drama and substance. Rather than hanging around the edges of

powerful institutions, literary journalists attempt to penetrate the cultures that make institutions work.

Literary journalists follow their own set of rules. Unlike standard journalism, literary journalism demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects. The voice of the writer surfaces to show readers that an author is at work. Authority shows through. Whether the subject is a cowboy and his wife in the Texas Panhandle or a computer design team in an aggressive corporation, the dramatic details yield only to persistent, competent, sympathetic reporters. Voice brings the authors into our world. When Mark Kramer discovers the smells in an operating room and cannot help thinking of steak, “to my regret,” his voice is as strong as a slap in the face. When John McPhee asks for the gorp and his traveling companions in Georgia discuss whether or not they should give any to “the little Yankee bastard,” his humble moment sets our mood.

Unlike fiction writers, literary journalists must be accurate. Characters in literary journalism need to be brought to life on paper, just as in fiction, but their feelings and dramatic moments contain a special power because we know the stories are true. The literary quality of these works comes from the collision of worlds, from a confrontation with the symbols of another, real culture. Literary journalism draws on immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism as essential forces.

Most readers are familiar with one brand of literary journalism, the New Journalism, which began in the 1960s and lasted through the mid-1970s. Many of the New Journalists such as Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion have continued to produce extraordinary books. But literary journalists like George Orwell, Lillian Ross, and Joseph Mitchell had been at work long before the New Journalists arrived. And now there has appeared a younger generation of writers who don't necessarily think of themselves as New Journalists, but do find immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism to be the hallmarks of their work. For years I have collected and admired this form of writing. Occasionally, magazine readers discover it in *Esquire*, *The*

Atlantic, The New Yorker, The Village Voice, New York, some of the better regional publications such as *Texas Monthly*, and even in *The New York Review of Books*.

This form of writing has been called literary journalism and it seems to me a term preferable to the other candidates: personal journalism, the new journalism, and parajournalism. Some people in my trade—I'm a journalism professor—argue it is nothing more than a hybrid, combining the fiction writer's techniques with facts gathered by a reporter. That may be. But the motion picture combines voice recording with the photograph, yet the hybrid still deserves a name.

While trying to define the novel, Ian Watt found that the early novelists couldn't provide help. They hadn't labeled their books "novels" and were not working in a tradition. Literary journalism has been around just long enough to acquire a set of rules. The writers know where the boundaries lie. The "rules" of harmony in music have been derived from what successful composers do. The same method can help explain what successful writers have done in creating the genre of literary journalism. I asked several about their craft, and their answers fill most of this introduction. The form also has a respectable history; it didn't arrive full grown with the new journalists of the 1960s. A. J. Liebling, James Agee, George Orwell, John Hersey, Joseph Mitchell and Lillian Ross had discovered the power that could be released by the techniques of literary journalism long before Tom Wolfe proclaimed a "new journalism."

The new journalists of the 1960s called attention to their own voices; they self-consciously returned character, motivation, and voice to nonfiction writing. Standard reporters, and some fiction writers, were quick to criticize the new journalism. It was not always accurate, they claimed. It was flashy, self-serving, and it violated the journalistic rules of objectivity. But the best of it has endured. Today's literary journalists clearly understand the difference between fact and falsehood, but they don't buy

into the traditional distinctions between literature and journalism. “Some people have a very clinical notion of what journalism is,” Tracy Kidder told me in the study of his home in the New England Berkshires. “It’s an antiseptic idea, the idea that you can’t present a set of facts in an interesting way without tainting them. That’s utter nonsense. That’s the ultimate machine-like tendency.” Kidder won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1982 for *The Soul of a New Machine*, a book that followed a design team as it created a new computer. He constructs narrative with a voice that allows complexity and contradiction. His literary tools—powerful story line and a personal voice—draw readers into something perhaps more recognizable as a real world than the “facts only” variety of reporting.

As a reader, I react differently to literary journalism than to short stories or standard reporting. Knowing *this really happened* changes my attitude while reading. Should I discover that a piece of literary journalism was made up like a short story, my disappointment would ruin whatever effect it had created as literature. At the same time, I sit down expecting literary journalism to raise emotions not evoked by standard reporting. Whether or not literary journalism equips me for living differently than other forms of literature, I read as if it might.

Literary journalists bring themselves into their stories to greater or lesser degrees and confess to human failings and emotions. Through their eyes, we watch ordinary people in crucial contexts. Mark Kramer watched during many cancer operations, while other people’s lives were in jeopardy on the operating table. Crucial contexts, indeed, and more so when Kramer discovered a spot one day and feared that it meant cancer for him. In El Salvador, Joan Didion opened her handbag and heard, in response, “the clicking of metal on metal all up and down the street” as weapons were armed. At such moments we involuntarily take sides over social and personal issues. These authors understand and convey feeling and emotion, the inner dynamics of cultures. Like anthropologists and

sociologists, literary reporters view cultural understanding as an end. But, unlike such academics, they are free to let dramatic action speak for itself. Bill Barich takes us to the horse races and brings alive the gambler's desire to control the seemingly magical forces of modern life; he aims to find the essences and mythologies of the track. By contrast, standard reporting presupposes less subtle cause and effect, built upon the events reported rather than on an understanding of everyday life. Whatever we name it, the form is indeed both literary and journalistic and it is more than the sum of its parts.

Two active generations of literary reporters are at work today.

John McPhee, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Richard Rhodes, and Jane Kramer found their voices during the "New Journalism" era from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Wolfe's name summons visions of wild experimentation with language and punctuation. These pyrotechnics have diminished in his newer work. Through twenty years of steady production, Wolfe has proven the staying power of a literary approach to journalism.

Writers such as Wolfe, McPhee, Didion, Rhodes, and Jane Kramer have influenced a younger generation of literary journalists. I interviewed several of these younger writers. They told me they grew up on New Journalism and saw it as the model for their developing craft.

- Richard West, 43, who helped start *Texas Monthly*, and later wrote for *New York* and *Newsweek* magazines, remembers discovering, as a journalism student, the writing of Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, and Tom Wolfe. "Those guys were just wonderful writers. Stunning. It was like hearing rock 'n' roll rather than Patti Paige. It opened your eyes to new vistas if you wanted to be a nonfiction writer," West said.
- Mark Kramer, 40, author of *Invasive Procedures*, said George Orwell's work introduced him to literary

journalism, especially *Down and Out in Paris and London* in which Orwell described his experiences as a tramp before World War II. The New Journalists were a more immediate role model for Kramer. “I read Tom Wolfe early,” he said. “I’m second generation New Journalist. I read McPhee when I was just coming up. Ed Sanders’ book on Manson, *The Family*, had a tremendous influence on me. He gave himself permission to speak. It was the first time I felt a reliable voice on the scene, rather than an institutional voice.”

- Sara Davidson, 41, learned the routines of standard reporting in the late 1960s at the Columbia School of Journalism and *The Boston Globe*. “When I first started writing for magazines, Lillian Ross was my model,” she said. “I was going to do what Lillian Ross had done. She never used the word ‘I’ and yet it was so clear there was an orienting consciousness guiding you.” Later, Davidson discovered her stories needed the first person. The strong narrative voices of Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and, recently, of Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* have been her ideals.

- Tracy Kidder, 38, admired Orwell, Liebling, Capote, Mailer, Rhodes, Wolfe, and many others. But when I asked if one writer stood above the others in influencing Kidder’s development, he quickly said, “McPhee has been my model. He’s the most elegant of all the journalists writing today, I think.”

- Mark Singer, at 33 the youngest in this group, epitomizes the course of discovery traveled by the younger literary journalists. At Yale, he majored in English and simply read. “I think my models were journalists. I really studied journalists. I was very conscious of who was writing what. In the early 1970s journalists were starting to become stars. Only after I came to *The New Yorker* in 1974 did I get in touch with people like Liebling and John Bainbridge—he wrote *The Super Americans*, a brilliant

book about Texas. He spent five years living in Texas. I went and read all of Bainbridge.” Singer, who grew up in Oklahoma, was also influenced by Norman Mailer and *New Yorker* writers such as Lillian Ross, Calvin Trillin, and Joseph Mitchell. “This stuff has been written in every era by certain writers,” he said. “People talk about Defoe or Henry Adams or whomever. Francis Parkman when he was writing *The Oregon Trail* was doing a kind of journalism as history. I think every era has those writers. I just happen to be shortsighted enough to focus upon my contemporaries.”

During those months of visits with writers, they told me about the pleasures of their trade, about the difficulties they have encountered, about the essentials of literary journalism—the “rules of the game” and about the boundaries of the form. Literary journalism wasn’t defined by critics; the writers themselves have recognized that their craft requires immersion, structure, voice, and accuracy. Along with these terms, a sense of responsibility to their subjects and a search for the underlying meaning in the act of writing characterize contemporary literary journalism.

Immersion

I live in the Connecticut River valley of western Massachusetts, where a surprising number of novelists, freelance journalists, artists, and scholars make their homes. When I mentioned to some of my friends that I would soon be visiting John McPhee in Princeton, New Jersey, the reaction was always the same: “Ask him if he’s read my books.” They wanted me to mention their names. The writers, English professors, and avid readers I know respect him enormously.

At the same time, as a teacher of journalism history and reporting at the University of Massachusetts, I know that some of the old guard don’t like him. Literary journalists are the heretics of the profession. An elder of the tribe of Old Journalists once wrote to inform me, using

an oddly mixed metaphor, that “McPhee is a journalistic spellbinder, that’s all.... Mr. McPhee’s journalistic warp and his literary woof make very thin cloth for any of us in the profession to use for patching our worn-out bromides.” But the half dozen literary journalists I met before I interviewed McPhee were universally respectful. During the train ride to Princeton, I thought about Tracy Kidder’s words—“McPhee has been my model”—and realized he had influenced many other young writers.

McPhee is a private man, friendly but guarded. Entering his office at Princeton University, I examined the mementos which testify to his immersion in subjects such as geology, canoeing, and the bears of New Jersey. On a bulletin board he has placed a warning sign:

DANGER
BEAR TRAP
DO NOT APPROACH

I took the message to heart. On the opposite wall he has a window-sized geologic map of the United States. He’s pinned a piece of green nylon cord on the map from coast to coast. The cord cuts through the Appalachians, passes straight over the Plains and Rockies, then wavers in the province of the Basin and Range (the mountains and valleys of Utah and Nevada) where, McPhee said, the colored rock formations on the map “look like stretch marks.” The green line clears the Sierra Nevada and ends at the Pacific Ocean. The nylon cord has followed Interstate 80 from coast to coast; it is the ribbon of narrative that binds together McPhee’s two recent books on the geology of North America. The books started out as a single article about the road cuts around New York City. Then a geologist told him that North American geology is best represented by an east-west line, and McPhee’s thoughts turned toward Interstate 80. “I developed a vaulting ambition,” he said. “Why not go to California? Why not look at *all* the rocks?” Four years and two books later, he took a break from the subject, although he said it

will take two more books to complete the journey.

“I discovered that you’ve got to understand a lot to write even a little bit. One thing leads to another. You’ve got to get into it in order to fit the pieces together,” he said. That makes intuitive sense to most writers, but McPhee’s seventeen books, produced in nineteen years, show an extraordinary staying power. He has fitted the pieces together to write about a designer of nuclear weapons, the history of the bark canoe, the technology of an experimental aircraft, environmental wars between Sierra Club director David Brower and developers hungry for wilderness land, the intricacies of tennis and basketball, the isolated cultures of both the New Jersey Pine Barrens and Scotland’s Inner Hebrides, conflicts among the residents of Alaska, and the geology of North America. Today, no other nonfiction writer approaches McPhee’s range of subject matter.

For McPhee, and for most other literary journalists, understanding begins with emotional connection, but quickly leads to immersion. In its simplest form, immersion means time spent on the job. McPhee drove 1,100 miles of southern roads with a field zoologist before writing “Travels in Georgia.” He journeyed several times cross-country on I-80 with geologists for *Basin and Range* and *In Suspect Terrain*. Over a period of two years he made long journeys in Alaska, months at a time, in all seasons, collecting notes for *Coming Into the Country*.

Literary journalists gamble with their time. Their writerly impulses lead them toward immersion, toward trying to learn all there is about a subject. The risks are high. Not every young writer can stake two or three years on a writing project that might turn up snake-eyes. Bill Barich won his gamble. With five novels unpublished, he left home to live at the race track. His story of those weeks, *Laughing in the Hills*, won the attention of Robert Bingham and William Shawn, executive editor and editor of *The New Yorker*. Most literary journalists see immersion as a luxury that could not exist without the financial backing and editorial support of a magazine. Tracy Kidder spent eight months inside a computer company before writing *The Soul*

of a New Machine. Although he had written many articles for *The Atlantic*, as a freelance writer he could not count on a regular paycheck. An advance on the book released him from the constant need to produce articles during the two years it took to research and write.

Kidder's house rang with excitement when I first visited. Three days earlier the Pulitzer Prize committee had announced the winners for 1982. Kidder took the general nonfiction award. His cramped office just off the living room still showed signs of struggle. Decorations were sparse. Fishing poles, a net, and a battered straw hat hung in the corner near a small wood stove. Above the desk a photograph, taken while he was immersed in a piece about hobos, showed Kidder riding a flatbed railroad car somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. Haphazardly stacked notebooks lay around the typewriter. The place felt like a bar room where fights break out.

Kidder is physically imposing, built like a tight end. He looks like he would be as tough as an old-time city editor. But he doesn't drill holes through people with probing questions. "I don't know how to come barging in on people," he said. "I've never gotten anywhere with that technique. One of the ways you do good research is you really go and live with people. Once I feel I have the freedom to ask the unpleasant question, I'll do it. But I'm not very good at badgering people. I figure if they won't tell me now, they'll tell me later. I'll just keep coming back."

Mark Kramer gambled two years of his life writing *Three Farms: Making Milk, Meat and Money from the American Soil*. During those two years he received literary support from Richard Todd, the senior editor of *The Atlantic* who also saw Kidder through *Soul of a New Machine*, and survived on the slim finances of a small advance and a foundation grant. Again, the gamble paid off. The proceeds from *Three Farms* and another grant enabled him to write *Invasive Procedures*. He watched surgeons at work for nearly two years, until he was confident that he understood the operating room routine,

could tell good techniques from bad, and could “translate the social by-play in the operating room.”

“You have to stay around a long time before people will let you get to know them,” Kramer said. “They’re guarded the first time and second time and the first ten times. Then you get boring. They forget you’re there. Or else they’ve had a chance to make you into something in their world. They make you into a surgical resident or they make you into a farmhand or a member of the family. And you let it happen.”

Every writer I talked with told similar stories. Their work begins with immersion in a private world; this form of writing might well be called “the journalism of everyday life.”

During a month of research, Richard West alternated day and night shifts while writing “The Power of ‘21” for *New York* magazine. West’s day schedule began at 6 a.m. in New York’s famous restaurant “21.” He followed the action of the restaurant upward, from the basement and the early morning prep crew, to the kitchen and the chefs, then at lunchtime out onto the floor with the bartenders and the maitre d’. His night shifts began around 4 p.m., when another crew arrived, and ended at 1 a.m. He inhaled the air of the kitchens, thick with steam and cooking aromas, and of the dining rooms, heavy with cigar smoke and status.

“It was a long day, but you had to be right there and they didn’t throw any rules on me,” West said. “You just become part of the woodwork until they open up and do things in front of you. You may get the surface details right, but you won’t get the kind of emotions you’re after—how people operate—until you disappear. Sometimes you never get that and your story falls flat on that point. It took a while, but they came to trust me and like me. So much of it is personality, it seems. If you are a person who likes people and respects people, and you genuinely show an interest, things come easily. You can’t be arrogant. You can’t be abrasive. That just won’t work.”

Mark Singer was only two years out of Yale when he came to *The New Yorker*. He had not yet discovered his

voice as a writer. “I started traveling the city and I found it wasn’t all Manhattan,” he said. “I decided the people I wanted to write about were not famous people. Having grown up far away from New York City probably enabled me to see and write about things that I otherwise might have overlooked. I’m struck by ironies that a native might not notice.”

I talked to Singer in his drab and noisy eighteenth floor cubicle at the *New Yorker* offices, which had once been McPhee’s quarters. Singer’s wife is a lawyer. She first mentioned the “buffs” at the courthouse in Brooklyn—spectators whose constant attendance at murder trials qualifies them as courtroom drama critics. “I started to hang out in the courthouse,” Singer said. “For several months I would go a couple days a week. At the same time I was doing ‘Talk of the Town’ pieces. It took me something like sixteen months, going over there and just hanging out with them.”

After all those months, the task shifted, as it always must, from reporting to writing. “I have to explain it to people who know only as much as I knew when I started out,” Singer said.

Structure

John McPhee reached up to his bookshelf and pulled down a large, hardbound book, which contained his notes from 1976 in Alaska. “This is a hefty one,” he said. These typewritten pages represented his passage from reporting to writing, from the field to the typewriter. Hidden inside those detailed notes, like a statue inside a block of granite, lies a structure that can animate the story for his readers.

“The piece of writing has a structure inside it,” he said. “It begins, goes along somewhere, and ends in a manner that is thought out beforehand. I always know the last line of a story before I’ve written the first one. Going through all that creates the form and the shape of the thing. It also relieves the writer, once you know the structure, to

concentrate each day on one thing. You know right where it fits.”

Structure, in a longer piece of nonfiction writing, has more work to do than merely to organize, according to McPhee. “Structure,” he said, “is the juxtaposition of parts, the way in which two parts of a piece of writing, merely by lying side-by-side, can comment on each other without a word spoken. The way in which the thing is assembled, you can get much said, which can be lying there in the structure of the piece rather than being spelled out by a writer.”

McPhee rummaged around in a file cabinet for a moment and came up with a diagram of the structure in “Travels in Georgia.” It looked like a lowercase “e.”

“It’s a simple structure, a reassembled chronology,” McPhee explained. “I went there to write about a woman who, among other things, picks up dead animals off the road and eats them. There’s an immediate problem when you begin to consider such material. The editor of *The New Yorker* is practically a vegetarian. I knew I was going to be presenting this story to William Shawn and that it would be pretty difficult to do so. That served a purpose, pondering what a general reader’s reaction would be. When people think of animals killed on the road, there’s an immediate putrid whiff that goes by them. The image is pretty automatic—smelly and repulsive. These animals we were picking up off the road were not repulsive. They had not been mangled up. They were not bloody. They’d been freshly killed. So I had to get this story off the ground without offending the sensibilities of the reader and the editor.”

McPhee and his friends ate several animals during the journey, such as a weasel, a muskrat, and, somewhere well along in the trip, a snapping turtle. But the piece *begins* with the snapping turtle. Turtle soup offends less than roasted weasel. Then the story got away from the subject of road-kills by visiting a stream channelization project. That segment led into an extended digression, in which McPhee told about Carol Ruckdeschel, who had

cleaned the snapping turtle and had a house full of wounded and battered animals she was nursing back to health.

“After going through all that we still haven’t had a weasel,” McPhee said. “Now we’re two-fifths of the way through the piece.” He pointed to the back side of the “e” on his diagram.

“If you’ve read this far, now we can risk some of these animals. After all, this has either proved itself or not by now as a piece of writing. We then go back to the beginning of the journey—the journey that on page one we were in the middle of—and there’s a fresh-killed weasel lying in the middle of the road. And the muskrat follows. When we come to the snapping turtle and the stream channelization project, we just jump over them and keep right on going in the form the journey had. The journey itself became the structure, broken up chronologically in this manner.”

Chronological structure dominates most journalism, as McPhee learned when he worked at *Time* magazine. But chronological reporting does not always serve the writer best. McPhee restructured time in “Travels in Georgia” and in the first part of *Coming Into the Country*. Sometimes, chronology may give way to thematic structure. In *A Roomful of Hovings*, a profile of Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, McPhee faced a peculiar problem. Hoving’s life contained a series of themes: his scattered experiences learning to recognize art fakes, his work as parks commissioner in New York, his undistinguished early career as a student, his lifelong relationship with his father, and so on. McPhee told one tale at a time, one story following another in a structure McPhee compares to a capital “Y.” The descending branches finally joined at a moment of an epiphany during Hoving’s college career at Princeton, and then proceeded along the bottom stem in a single line. McPhee maintained time sequences within each episode, but the themes were arranged to set up their dramatic juxtaposition.

McPhee handed me a Xeroxed quotation. “Read this,” he said. The passage quoted Albert Einstein, on the

music of Schubert: “But in his larger works I am disturbed by a lack of architectonics.” The term architectonics refers to structural design that gives order, balance, and unity to a work, the element of form that relates the parts to each other and to the whole.

I had previously heard the term architectonics from Richard Rhodes, who had said, “The kind of architectonic structures that you have to build, that nobody ever teaches or talks about, are crucial to writing and have little to do with verbal abilities. They have to do with pattern ability and administrative abilities—generalship, if you will. Writers don’t talk about it much, unfortunately.” They may not speak much of it, but good literary journalists are probably haunted by it.

Accuracy

In a society in which school children learn that there are two kinds of writing, fiction and nonfiction, and that the nonfiction is on the whole pretty flat prose, doing literary journalism is tricky business. We naturally assume that what reads like fiction must be fiction. A local editorial writer who set out to congratulate Tracy Kidder made one such revealing slip: “Tracy Kidder, a resident of Williamsburg, has won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *The Soul of a New Machine*.” Kidder read it and shook his head in disbelief. A *novel*, an invented narrative. It was a little irritating to him after he had practically lived in the basement of Data General Corporation for eight months, and spent two and a half years on the book. Kidder took great pains to get the quotations right, to catch all the details accurately.

A mandate for accuracy pervades literary journalism, according to its practitioners. McPhee, who finds an avuncular role uncomfortable, nevertheless has the right to make a few suggestions for those who find a model in his work. “Nobody’s making rules that cover everybody,” he said. “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 a 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.

“And they blur something that ought to be distinct. It's one thing to say nonfiction has been rising as an art. If that's what they mean by the line blurring between fiction and nonfiction, then I'd prefer another image. What I see in that image is that we don't know where fiction stops and fact begins. That violates a contract with the reader.”

Part of the mandate for accuracy is good old-fashioned reporter's pride. Both Kramer and Rhodes mentioned the experience of reading, in their local papers or in national news magazines, stories they knew something about privately, and finding that the reports lacked accuracy. All reporters have a commitment to accuracy, but given time and immersion, it is not hard to improve on the record of ordinary news practice.

Accuracy can also insure the authority of the writer's voice, Kramer explained. “I'm constantly trying to accumulate authority in my writing, intersecting the reader's experience and judgment. I want to be able to make an observation and be trusted, so I have to show that I'm a good observer, that I'm savvy. I can do a lot of that with language, with sureness and informality. You can also blow your authority very quickly. One of the big motivations for getting all the details right—why I had farmers read my farm book in manuscript, and surgeons read the surgeons manuscript—is I don't want to lose authority. I don't want to get a single detail wrong.”

Voice

The New Journalists of the 1960s and their critics never reached agreement on the use of the self in journalism. Sometimes New Journalists turned the spotlight on themselves in apparent violation of all the rules of objective reporting.

Much of the controversy over the self in journalism has been explicated by journalism professor David Eason, whose studies of New Journalism defined two groups. In the first camp, New Journalists were like ethnographers who provided an account of “what it is that’s going on here.” Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Truman Capote, among others, removed themselves from their writing and concentrated on their subjects’ realities.

The second group included writers such as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and John Gregory Dunne. They saw life through their own filters, describing what it felt like to live in a world where shared public understandings about “the real world” and about culture and morals had fallen away. Without an external frame of reference, they focused more on their own reality. The authors in this second group were often a dominating presence in their works.

Either way, critics had a field day. Herbert Gold ripped holes in the personal journalism of Norman Mailer and others like him, calling it “epidemic first personism” in a 1971 article. Meanwhile, Tom Wolfe, who offered readers a mannered voice but never stood on center stage as Mailer did, suffered the reverse. Wilfrid Sheed said the distortion produced by Wolfe’s interpretations was the source of our enjoyment. He should quit pretending to evoke a subject “as it really is,” Sheed said. New Journalists, it seemed, either had too much of themselves in their writing, or not enough.

The younger literary journalists have calmed down. As I spoke with these younger writers, they seemed

concerned with finding the right voice to express their material. “Every story contains inside it one, maybe two, right ways of telling it,” Tracy Kidder said. “Your job as a journalist is to discover that.” Richard Rhodes said he struggles to find the right voice, but that once he does, the story nearly tells itself. Literary journalists are no longer worried about “self,” but they do care about tactics for effective telling, which may require the varying presence of an “I” from piece to piece.

The introduction of personal voice, according to Mark Kramer, allows the writer to play one world off against another, to toy with irony. “The writer can posture, say things not meant, imply things not said. When I find the right voice for a piece, it admits play, and that’s a relief, an antidote to being pushed around by your own words,” Kramer said. “Voice that admits ‘self’ can be a great gift to readers. It allows warmth, concern, compassion, flattery, shared imperfection—all the real stuff that, when it’s missing, makes writing brittle and larger than life.”

Kramer studied English at Brandeis and sociology at Columbia. For several years in the late 1960s, he wrote for the Liberation News Service in New York and for several Boston publications. He is quick to note irony. He flips conversations from one level to another, sometimes feigning ignorance, sometimes swiftly establishing his authority. He takes note of aggression or fragility in others.

“I think I create a different kind of architecture than most journalists,” Kramer said. “I structure things so that I am commenting on the narrative, commenting on the reader’s world, and on my world, and, also, I’m indicating that my style is self-conscious. I feel like a host at a semiformal party with clever guests, guests I care about.”

Daily reporters subsume voice more often than they call attention to it, creating what Kramer calls an “institutional” voice. As I tell reporting students, whenever a newspaper writer makes a judgment or expresses an opinion, readers assume the newspaper itself has taken a stand. Without the newspaper standing behind them, literary journalists must discover how they belong in the

story as private selves. Frequently, the writer's decision to use a personal voice grows from a feeling that publicly shared manners and morals can no longer be taken for granted.

"Once you don't have a common moral community for an audience," Kramer said, "if you want to go on talking about what's interesting, then it's useful to introduce the narrator. Even if there are a lot of different readers, they can all say, 'Oh, yeah, I know what sort of guy this is: a Jewish, New York, intellectual, left-liberal.' If the writer says who he is, and how he thinks about something, the reader knows a lot. But if he masks who he is, you're on your own. You have to look at other clues, his level of literacy and so on."

Personal voice can discomfit writers as well as readers, but that may be the point. The institutional voice of newspapers can carry nonfiction writing only so far. Beyond that, the reader needs a guide. Sara Davidson said her transition from the *Boston Globe* to literary journalism wasn't easy. "Anyone who has come up from a newspaper has a great deal of self-consciousness about even writing the word 'I.' I don't remember when I first used it, but it was just in one little paragraph, a trial balloon. The more I did it the easier it got and also I found I could do more with it. It enabled me to impose the storyteller on the material."

Responsibility

A writer's voice grows from experience. Sara Davidson's voice in "Real Property" developed while she kept a journal of her life. There are hazards in using the personal voice, however, some of which she explained to me.

Davidson lives in the hills of Los Angeles now. Stepping into her office, I was surprised to see a big, expensive, IBM word processor parked in the middle of the room like a Cadillac. The letters I had received from her were handwritten. She composes longhand and later

transcribes her manuscript pages, scrawled with lines and circles, onto the word processor for editing. The small room seemed filled with the high-speed printer, the computer, and a telephone answering machine. Davidson is a warm person, dedicated to the feelings of those she writes about. But she is an ambitious writer, willing to drive her writing hard and risk the consequences.

That spirit has a way of getting her into trouble. Davidson learned about responsibility after she wrote *Loose Change*, the story of three women's lives during the tumultuous years in the 1960s when America suffered through a social revolution. She was one of the three women in the book. In college at Berkeley they had lived in the same house. Later, they went their own ways, Davidson to New York and a journalism career, another to the radical political world of Berkeley, and the third to the big money art world. In the early 1970s, Davidson interviewed her former roommates and reconstructed their experiences for *Loose Change*. When she wrote it in the mid-1970s, two movements converged. First, she had learned that people responded best when her writing was personal, and she filled the book with intimate details of her life. Second, a confessional strain in the women's movement peaked at that time; many women were writing in the most direct terms about deep fears and personal relations.

"I think Freud said once that you owe yourself a certain discretion," Davidson told me. "You just don't go blabbing everything about yourself publicly. But that was not where the women were going. There was no discretion being practiced. Everything was permissible and I was caught up in the ideas. I wrote about my parents and my husband and all my old lovers, my career and my sister, affairs and abortion and sex—everything."

She showed drafts of the book to the two other women involved and to her husband. They participated in the revisions. But when the book was published, responsibility for these personal intimacies became the issue. Davidson had changed the names of many characters

and the two women, but friends recognized them instantly. “Suddenly, something that was all right as a manuscript was not all right when it was being read widely and people were responding to it,” Davidson said. “There’s one scene where I had a fight with my husband and he slapped me. Well, he started getting crank calls from people who accused him of being a wife beater. It’s true, he did slap me. But suddenly he was being vilified, publicly. There were people who read it and thought he was a monster. One of the women would be walking down the street and someone would come up to her and say, ‘My God, I didn’t know you had an abortion in your father’s office when you were 16!’ Relatives of the family would call in horror that she had exposed this kind of thing about herself and her family. The man she had lived with for seven years thought it was a major violation of confidence and trust. He said, ‘I wasn’t living with you to have it become public knowledge. We weren’t living our life as a research project.’” The other woman had a child old enough to be disturbed by Davidson’s revelations of his mother’s sex life, and her portrait of his father. The story did not fade away, like a magazine article. It was a selection of the Literary Guild, had a large paperback sale, and became a best seller. Later, there was a television production based on the book.

“They *turned* on me,” Davidson said. “Quite understandably. They couldn’t escape it. It didn’t blow over. It’s hard to describe their pain. It haunted them for two years. What bothered me was that I had caused pain to other people, to my husband, to the women, who went through hell.”

After *Loose Change* was published, Davidson decided she would never write so intimately about her life again. Had she anticipated the results, Davidson said, she would have written a novel instead. “I would have written the exact same book. I would have said it was fiction. People say knowing it was about real people heightened their appreciation and relationship to it. They preferred that it was nonfiction. But I do know I would never, never write

again so intimately about my life because I can't separate my life from the people who have been in it."

This conflict seems inherent in a form of writing where practitioners form friendships with their subjects. Davidson must surely have the right to draw on her own journal—her own life—and write however intimately she chooses about her experiences. The effect on others is another question.

"It's one thing if you decide to tell me, for print, about your marriage," she said. "But it's another thing for your wife. What do we owe her? Or your parents? Or your child? What do you morally owe to somebody in exposing things about them that aren't generally exposed?"

Other writers told me they use the role of the professional journalist to some advantage, but they have never written anything so intimate as *Loose Change*. McPhee said he takes the stance of the reporter with an open notebook. The people he interviews know he is writing for *The New Yorker*; they are responsible for their revelations. Reactions to McPhee's writing are unpredictable, he says, so he does not try to control or shape the reaction. During the two years he worked on *The Soul of a New Machine*, Tracy Kidder formed a friendship with Tom West, leader of the computer design team. Toward the end, Kidder showed West the manuscript. "He didn't talk to me for a while, but it was okay," Kidder said. "I don't like to do that. It's painful. If you're going to do a long piece you have to become friends with your subjects. You have to be pretty cold about it. Distance just comes naturally when you sit down at the typewriter." Many of the writers I talked with have their subjects sign releases at the beginning of projects. No one wants to spend time with someone who may later get cold feet. But the signature on a piece of paper is a legal release, not a moral one.

"Obviously, if you take a project, your assumption is you don't owe them anything," Davidson said. "Everything is for the record. Anything you observe is fair game. And that's how I've practiced it. All the women in *Loose Change* signed releases. They made it legal to give me this

material. Emotionally and morally it's not always so clear cut."

The Masks of Men

Richard Rhodes sprawled on a couch, looking up and down a list of terms. He has an oval face and red hair. When he spoke, his eyes locked on mine. "These things are a seamless web," he said. "I'm such a primitive. I don't think much about writing, as writing." Rhodes has lived in Kansas City, Missouri, nearly all his 47 years. The twangy drawl I expected was not in his voice, however. The last couple years he has spent researching the history of nuclear weapons for his book, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*.

I had asked each writer to respond to several terms as descriptions of their own literary journalism. Rhodes ran his eyes down the list again:

historical sweep
attention to language
participation and immersion
symbolic realities
accuracy
sense of time and place
grounded observations
context
voice.

"Symbolic realities," Rhodes said. "My eye lights there every time I go down the page.

"That's been terribly important to me. The transcendentalist business of the universe showing forth, the sense that there are deep structures behind information, has been central to everything I've done in writing. Certainly it's central to writing about nuclear weapons, and I'm beginning to uncover some of those deep structures. We're talking not so much about nuclear weapons as that the

twentieth century has perfected a total death machine. Making corpses is our highest technology.

“That’s what I meant in the preface to *Looking for America* when I said I have looked for something else, ‘The beast in the jungle, the masks of men.’ I meant it all shows forth, shows forth for everybody. That’s what I go after. It’s not facile metaphor making. It’s not drawing analogies to make a point. It’s looking through, sifting through the information in the hope of seeing what’s behind it.”

More than any other writer I have met, Rhodes has reason to look through prose to the symbolic realities which lie beyond. “Symbolic realities” has two sides: the inner meaning writing may hold for a writer; and the “deep structures” Rhodes mentioned that lie behind the content of a piece of writing.

Rhodes spent his junior high and high school years in a boys’ home near Independence, Missouri. His mother had committed suicide when he was a baby and his father, although remarried, had proved unable to raise a family of three sons. Rhodes went to Yale on a scholarship and returned to a job as a writer with Hallmark Cards in Kansas City. For ten years, he struggled. He edited house organs and then short books for Hallmark, and did occasional book reviews for *The New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. Encouraged by literary friends, he signed a contract for a book on the Midwest, *The Inland Ground*. After signing, he faced the horror of actually writing the book. He felt unprepared. Insecurity and writer’s block plagued him. “I wrote two chapters, one about culture in Kansas City and one about a powerful foundation man. They didn’t have any sparkle and unity,” Rhodes said.

He signed on for a coyote hunt. “The violence of that experience broke everything open. I came back and got drunk and started writing that chapter. It came, almost without change, drunkenly, over a period of about a week of working at night while I worked the job all day.” The chapter became “Death All Day.”

“I had a sense of breaking out, of discharge. It was identical to the sort of thing that happens in anybody’s

psychoanalysis, where they suddenly just *let loose*. I have a friend who is a Kirkegaardian scholar. I was visiting him recently and we were talking late and he asked me a question about my life. I started telling him and he said, ‘Ah, the story.’ And he’s right. At some point everyone finally reaches the point where he tells you his *story*.

“I keep repeating the same theme in everything I write—not consciously but apparently inevitably—of normal, good people suddenly confronted with diabolic evil or terrible disaster or tragedy and how they not only work through it but also, in a sense, *civilize* it, make rules around it, incorporate it into their lives. I’m not sure what that reworks for me, but my childhood was hair-raising enough.”

Rhodes told me of a recurring nightmare he used to have, that he had murdered a baby and buried it somewhere. People were digging in the area and might expose it. He was the baby, he said. In “Death All Day,” the piece in which he finally broke through to emotional material, Rhodes mentions that the hunted coyotes are “the size of young children.”

“I had to spend an awful lot of time as a child not speaking. In fact, I remember a few times when my stepmother was preparing to educate my brother and me with some convenient artifact, a mophandle or a softball bat, when I found myself standing in a corner urgently straining to become *invisible*. I stored up a lifetime of observations out of experiences like that. A symbol of that anger for me clearly is the atomic bomb: the power to destroy the world, which children somehow think it’s possible to do.” Writing serves a purpose here, Rhodes says, not taking the place of therapy, but turning anger and passion to moral and social use.

Other writers avoided the phrase symbolic realities. Kidder absolutely recoiled. It sounded to him like a coat of paint on a piece of writing, added later to achieve academic respectability. Kidder found other terms to talk about the same thing. “I think of it in terms of resonance,” Kidder said. “The conception of *Soul of a New Machine* was to

convey something of the whole by looking at one of its parts, to let this team of computer designers stand for other teams. Usually the best works of literature have a close attachment to the particular. You pluck a guitar string and another one vibrates.”

Like Kidder, John McPhee wanted to avoid placing his work in categories. It would be unfair, of course, to tie up any writer’s work that way. Richard Rhodes does not write only about good people facing disasters. Finding that symbolism in a literary journalist’s work does not characterize all the work. McPhee suggested such characterizations are the task of academics (he looked at me askance as he said it) but then he revealed one such secret about his own writing.

“There really are lots of ideas going by,” McPhee said. “A huge stream of ideas. What makes somebody choose one over another? If you make a list of all the work I’ve ever done, 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. That is no accident.

“Paul Fussell said he wrote about the First World War as a way of expressing himself about his own experiences in the Second World War. That makes *complete* sense. Why did I write about tennis players? Why did I write about a basketball player? Why hold this person up for scrutiny and not that one? Because you’ve got some personal interest that relates to your own life. It’s an important theme about anybody’s writing.”

After several months spent interviewing writers, dragging around my list of characteristics and concerns of literary journalism, the entries sounded mechanical. Just immerse yourself in a subject, find a good structure, maybe use some of Tom Wolfe’s techniques for documenting “status life” and writing scenes, and then what? Will that be literary journalism?

I came to doubt that anything was so certain. Ultimately, everyone I spoke with circled around a difficult topic. Writers talk easily about techniques, but like all of

us, they find it hard to explain their motivations. Sometimes we would get close enough for me to sense the artist behind the page. Sara Davidson was talking about creating strong narratives, where from the first paragraph the reader buys the ticket and has to take the trip. She stopped to consider for a moment, and said, “I’m not even sure how this is done. There are certain tricks but I don’t think it’s a matter of tricks. I think it has a lot to do with sensibility. I asked Philip Roth once if he thought he could create more sense of intimacy by using the first person. He said he thought it was the urgency and intensity with which he grabbed hold of the material, grasped it, and was able to pull the reader into his world. I think it has something to do with the author’s sensibility.”

A couple of years earlier, not long after I first met him, Mark Kramer had also tried to explain the heart of the differences between literary journalism and the standard forms of nonfiction. “I’m still excited about the form of literary journalism,” he said. “It’s like a Steinway piano. It’s good enough for all the art I can put into it. You can put Glenn Gould on a Steinway and the Steinway is still better than Glenn Gould. It’s good enough to hold all the art I can bring to it. And then some.”

###