

Conversations with Tracy Kidder

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Points of Entry: Cross-Currents in Storytelling, Issue 3, 2005

Review Essay: Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Asked to review Tracy Kidder's new book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, I balked. I've known Kidder for 23 years, so I'm not an objective reviewer.

The assignment grew into a conversation with Kidder about how he wrote the book, some decisions he made along the way, and what I consider two important new developments in Kidder's literary journalism that are on display in his latest work.

The first development is that he wrote the book in the first person. While this seems an insignificant change, I think it illustrates something important in the world of literary journalism.

Kidder has practiced his craft of literary journalism primarily in third person since before he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Soul of a New Machine* in 1982. His list of books includes *House* (1988), *Among Schoolchildren* (1990), *Old Friends* (1993), and *Home Town* (2000). All of them, except for extremely brief appearances by the author, were in third person. Like John McPhee, who rarely appears in his works, Kidder has argued that the subject of the book is not its author. He tried first person in his first book, *The Road to Yuba City* (1974), now largely forgotten. He didn't like the results. "I was too young and self-absorbed to see what ought to be obvious," he told me in 1993, "that I was less likely to write honestly about myself than any other person in the world."

Literary journalists generally have been divided into two philosophical camps. In one camp we find Ted Conover and Susan Orlean, who tell the story as seen through their own eyes and their own sensibilities—their only means for apprehending the phenomena of the world. Historically, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion sat around the same campfire. Visible through the woods was another campfire where writers such as Kidder and McPhee have kept themselves warm but largely out of the text. Like Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese before, they feel the reality of their subjects' stories does not require the obvious presence of the writer. Still, there is in their work the presence of a guiding consciousness without using the first person pronoun.

Kidder's switch from third- to first-person point of view in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* does not represent a movement to the other campfire, much less a resolution of a burning conflict. Those philosophical differences have endured much more than literary conflicts. Instead, it may represent an important new mood among literary journalists.

Kidder, a tall, athletic man, frets endlessly while drafting his stories. He doesn't smoke, but he chews toothpicks by the box when he's finishing a project. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* took nine years to write and God knows how many toothpicks. It required several trips to Haiti, where Kidder's subject, Dr. Paul Farmer, has a pioneering medical center in the impoverished central plateau. Farmer provides free treatment for patients with AIDS and tuberculosis, and every other kind of illness. Kidder also traveled to Russia, Cuba, Paris, Montreal, Peru, Siberia, Geneva, Mexico, and several other places either with Farmer or in pursuit of information about him.

Farmer was the first person to successfully treat AIDS and tuberculosis in such a poor environment. He fights with drug companies for lower-cost pharmaceuticals. He cajoles the Harvard Medical School into supporting his work, and sometimes "borrows" equipment or medicines from them to use in Haiti. He donated the entire award from his MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" to Partners In Health, the non-profit

group that supports his work, and he backs that up with most of his salary. He begs wealthy foundations and donors to support his innovative medical regimes and to recognize that, in fact, it is cost effective to treat Russian prisoners with multiple drug resistant (MDR) TB, or AIDS patients in central Haiti and other Third World countries. “Farmer spends about two hundred dollars to cure an uncomplicated case of TB in Haiti. The same cure in the United States costs between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars,” Kidder wrote in his *New Yorker* profile of “The Good Doctor” on July 10, 2000. Not only has Farmer proven that treating the poor with proper medical care can be cost effective, but his work exposes the social injustice reflected in the medical and pharmaceutical systems in most of the world.

A Common Complaint of Nonfiction Writers

But this is about how Kidder wrote the book, not about its content. Recently, Nick Lemann, dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, shared with me a resentment that many writers hold: “A common complaint of nonfiction writers including me, is when reviewed, nonfiction is reviewed as being about a subject matter rather than as a piece of writing. Where Tracy writes his book about Haiti, it will be reviewed as a work of public policy analysis, not as a work of literary journalism.” Following Lemann’s advice, let me talk less about the content and more about the literary decisions Kidder made.

Kidder wrote twice, and in a neutral first person voice, about Paul Farmer before *Mountains Beyond Mountains* was published. Farmer made a cameo appearance in “The Siege of Mirebalais” in *The New Yorker* of April 17, 1995, meeting with a U.S. Army Special Forces captain to complain about the release of a murderer who was responsible for beheading the assistant mayor. “The Captain and the doctor faced each other, the music from town rising as the light faded,” Kidder wrote. “As they continued to talk, I had the feeling they were circling each other, like two young men who don’t really want to fight.” That was Kidder’s introduction to Farmer. Kidder took a plane to Miami with him and discovered that the doctor was a

graduate of Harvard Medical School, also with a Ph.D. in anthropology from Harvard, and a recent recipient of the MacArthur Foundation's "genius grant." Kidder recognized a great subject for a story.

"Ordinarily I would have pursued such a person," Kidder told me. Instead, he spent a couple years writing a book about Northampton, Mass., *Home Town*, which he described as a reaction to seeing Haiti. Northampton works, Haiti does not. There was another reason that the enterprising nonfiction writer didn't pursue Farmer. "I knew he was going to mess with my peace of mind," Kidder said. It must have felt like sitting on the plane next to Mahatma Gandhi.

The Good Doctor

The magnetic prospect of a great story about a good person pulled Kidder back. He published a profile of Farmer in *The New Yorker* of July 10, 2000, titled "The Good Doctor." Portions of that article appear in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, but the book resonates with a different feeling. Frankly, I felt the *New Yorker* article wasn't terribly successful. Farmer's work carried an inspirational quality that made me feel a little failed. He was a saint—a successful saint. It's difficult to admit, but he annoyed me.

Kidder gradually recognized the problem. Women friends, for example, told him that Farmer sounded like a great guy but they wouldn't want to be married to him. "I heard that enough that I started saying that I didn't think they'd been asked to marry him," Kidder said. Eventually, he said, "I had to realize there was maybe a problem in the tone of the article. It couldn't be a hagiography." Readers found a biography of a saint all too easy to resist, as I had.

His solution involved the use of "a much more thoroughgoing first person" point of view than he had ever used before. *The New Yorker* pieces both included first person, but Kidder added something more edgy in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. "In my other books, it wasn't a good tool," Kidder

said. “I mean, who cares what I think? In this case, I felt the reader needed someone less virtuous than Farmer to identify with.”

In the book Kidder became that less virtuous person, someone with whom the non-saintly among us could feel comfortable. He described his first meeting with Farmer and noted that he didn’t much care for him. He challenged Farmer’s good works at several points, asking if anyone could replicate the medical system of a man who donated virtually all his money to the cause and worked endless hours and years in the service of the poor. “It still seemed to me,” Kidder wrote, “that he took a stance all too conveniently impregnable. He embodied a preferential option for the poor. Therefore, any criticism of him amounted to an assault on the already down-trodden people he served.” (p. 210)

The idea to adopt a challenging first person point-of-view came to Kidder slowly. He had written and polished a wonderful third person opening for the book. It involved a “Stump-the-Stars” intellectual exercise at Massachusetts General Hospital. A famous doctor such as Farmer is given a mystery case, including all the lab work, which had caused great difficulty in diagnosis at Mass General. Farmer’s analysis of the evidence would be delivered to an audience of colleagues in the famous Etherdome at Mass General, the first place where ether was used as a surgical anesthetic. A medical student and Farmer were having a glass of wine the evening before the presentation. The student watched as Farmer opened the case files for the first time and looked at the data. After reading for two minutes, Farmer said, “This can only be typhoid.” The doctors at Mass General don’t see typhoid that often, but Farmer had dealt with it regularly in Haiti. “Of course, his presentation the next day was brilliant,” Kidder said. While this opening scene might have been perfect for a magazine article, Kidder let it go. It doesn’t appear in the book. “It didn’t lead where I wanted to go with the book,” he said.

Kidder resisted changing his point of view. He recalled Mark Kramer’s comment about there being nothing inherently

interesting in a story about how an ignorant writer became slightly less ignorant. There had to be a reason for it. His editor, Richard Todd, helped when he identified “the Problem of Goodness—how to write convincingly about someone whose flaws are so much smaller than your own.” Kidder eventually and reluctantly saw the need for first-person testimony. “I can assert that Farmer doesn’t keep anything, that he lives a Spartan life, that he gave away the MacArthur Foundation award. Yet many Americans find such a person implausible. It arouses their irritation.” His particular first-person portrayal includes challenging Farmer, and badgering him to tell stories about Haiti. This badgering, complicated interaction between Kidder and Farmer begins at a point in Chapter Three where Kidder felt the reader would start to feel uncomfortable with Farmer. It ends 180 pages later when they leave Cuba and Kidder realizes that “Farmer wasn’t put on earth to make anyone feel comfortable, except for those lucky enough to be his patients.” (p. 210) This writerly solution worked. Instead of being jealous of Farmer and his life’s work, I reacted by being a little critical of Kidder, who was picking on a marvelous individual. Whereas I was annoyed by Farmer’s goodness when I read Kidder’s magazine article, after reading the book I found myself contributing money to Partners In Health.

In the world of literary journalism a decision to switch from the third-person campfire to the first-person campfire once came freighted with partisan bickering, especially during the New Journalism era of the 1960s and 1970s. Writers almost never talk about their work using the language of literary criticism, but they could be grouped into philosophical camps with great accuracy. David Eason did exactly that in his article, “The New Journalism and the Image-World” in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*. I think Eason was right about the New Journalists and his interpretation has endured. Today, however, such matters may be an artistic decision by a writer seeking the best point of view rather than something dictated by a philosophical stance. I wonder if the distinction between the realist and the phenomenologist (or what Eason also calls the “modernist”) writers has broken down.

Treating Issues Differently

At first glance, when literary decisions such as Kidder's create little controversy, it suggests that literary journalism has arrived as a stable genre. But nothing is stable in magazines these days, where editors insist on topics that are front-page news. David Remnick at *The New Yorker* has steered the magazine away from literary journalism in many cases. He refused to let Kidder double the length of his profile of Farmer. These pressures from editors and publishers bring me to the second development that I see in Kidder's plan for this book.

The second development is simply that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* took on the "issues"—those "Topic A" news subjects that create the contemporary buzz. Kidder had not done this in direct fashion in any of his previous books. In his books, readers saw how a singular character—a computer designer, a homebuilder, a schoolteacher, an aging nursing home resident, a local cop—dealt with some issue. Issues inevitably come up in the life of any character but Kidder never took the opportunity to tell the reader what to think. Rather, we got to experience life in a fifth-grade classroom or in a nursing home, and from those experiences perhaps we could feel the issues more vividly.

Old Friends and an earlier book, *Among Schoolchildren*, shared a hands-off approach to the big, important topics that dominate the news. His publisher supported it, although today such an approach has faded at least in the magazine world. In *Among Schoolchildren*, Kidder spent an entire year in a fifth grade classroom in Holyoke, Mass., watching an extraordinary teacher deal with underprivileged students. Issues floated on the sidelines—are we treating minority students equally, is public education done correctly, what can fix the problems? Similarly, in *Old Friends*, all the public issues of appropriate care for the elderly, the costs for nursing home residents, and the quality of the staff were an offstage presence.

Kidder says he had little to add to the volumes that have already been published on the issues of aging—the costs, the

management of institutions, and so forth. “I set out with a general issue—old age—and found myself in a particular nursing home and facing a particular group of people. At that point all the issues of aging ceased to interest me much. They're not interesting except when they're in a context of real people. I wanted to look at aging from the inside,” Kidder told me.

He views the reading public as divided into two parts. One likes narrative and the other wants to be told how to think. “There could have been more of what a friend calls ‘Talmudic asides.’ But I wanted to write narrative,” Kidder said. “I wanted to get close to what really matters, what it’s like to be old.

“I learned what it’s like inside a nursing home. I try to write the books I’d like to read. Someone once asked me if *Among Schoolchildren* could be an important book because it was located in only one classroom with only one teacher. I should have said I didn’t want to write an important book, I wanted to write a good book.” Rather than treating aging as he did, Kidder could have done what he calls “a smattering of portraits.” He did that when he was writing articles for *The Atlantic*. Writing about Vietnam veterans, he found representatives of the black veteran, the disabled veteran, and the veteran in jail. The articles were designed to use characters as representatives of the “issues.” When writing *Old Friends*, Kidder was less interested in that kind of writing.

"I like books that have a sustained narrative. You end up with the same people you started with and you've gone somewhere with them," he said.

Mountains Beyond Mountains, however, brings the issues of world health care—its unequal distribution, its costs, and its threats—to the forefront. In doing so, Kidder never leaves the sustained narrative of his central character. For one thing, part of Farmer’s life involves convincing government officials that they should care whether or not Haitians get treated for AIDS, or whether Russian prisoners have MDR TB. The second part of Farmer’s mission involves persuading those same officials

that quality medical care can be affordable. Farmer himself constantly confronts the “issues” in his everyday life.

“I did it through a person who is pretty close to the center of those issues,” Kidder told me. Every time I see a news story about Bill Clinton speaking up for an AIDS program in China, or some governmental effort to provide lower cost drugs for TB or AIDS in Africa, India, or South America, I’m reminded of what I learned in Kidder’s book. Most of these issues originated in Paul Farmer’s work in Haiti.

“The public *ought* to be interested,” Kidder said. “This is the most important thing I’ve written about. We’re facing pandemics that are huge in absolute numbers of dead, plagues that could rival the extinction of indigenous peoples in the Americas. But people would rather not read about this. I took it on as a good story. But as a strategy for writing about dull, unpalatable issues—you could fall asleep listening to the medical reports—you get people to pay attention with a guy like Farmer. But I didn’t come at it from that direction.”

One of my colleagues walked in to my office the other day and said, “I think Tracy Kidder’s new book is the best one he’s written.” I mention that because I agree with the opinion. Kidder brilliantly explains a highly technical field of medicine using a practitioner as a central character. In that regard he achieves something special that I have only rarely seen since Kidder’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Soul of a New Machine* and Richard Rhodes’ *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1995), which also won a Pulitzer. I think the power in the book derives from having a first person narrator whose presence solves problems in the deep structure of the story. And it lets us understand how extraordinary individuals push the big issues of the news, and thus we can feel good about having spent the time. Exactly those decisions in the hands of a writer like Tracy Kidder make literary journalism creative, entertaining, and in this case informative even if the news scares us.

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