

The Personal and the Historical: Literary Journalism and Literary History

By Norman Sims

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the personal connections that quality literary journalists hold to their topics. Two works that are actually histories are examined. The first is Richard Rhodes' *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1988. The second is Michael and Elizabeth Norman's *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath* (2009). Historical literary journalism seems to be a special category with concerns that overlap journalism and history. The paper also pursues some thoughts about the "literary" in journalism and history, and how the personal connections of the authors may be a distinctive element.

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Presented to
The NonFictionNow Conference
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa
November 6, 2010

The Personal and the Historical: Literary Journalism and Literary History

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As storytellers, historians share a narrative form with literary journalists and novelists. John Higham has noted that the public has not necessarily wanted to read history, except for brief periods, and that historians and storytellers without formal academic training—such as the noted Muckraking journalist Ida Tarbell— have usually been far more successful in the marketplace. Higham wrote:

Looking back to the dazzling success of the great literary historians of the mid-nineteenth century, the professionals and their critics have often deplored the existence of a wide gulf between modern academic historians and the general public. Usually responsibility is laid at the door of the ivory tower in which professional historians supposedly dwell...The complaint is an old and chronic one, going back at least to the early years of the twentieth century. Always, it charges the professional historian with failing a waiting public by making history dull, jejune, and overly specialized.¹

This remains true today. When the public wants history, it apparently wants history well told with the literary qualities that make for great storytelling.

A phrase such as “the literature of history” dates from much earlier than the term literary journalism. I’m not sure when it was first used, but historian Keith Windschuttle said, “No one

¹ John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America*, p. 68. 2

has ever provoked an objection by claiming history is a form of literature.”²

John Clive, a Harvard professor of history and literature, focused his work on great literary historians such as Edward Gibbon from the eighteenth century; Thomas Babington Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville from the nineteenth century; and Elie Halévy from the twentieth century. Clive wrote, “No one ever questions the desirability of, or the need for, rereading *Pride and Prejudice*, attending yet another performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*, or watching *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* once again. These are, after all, richly textured works of genius yielding new meanings, insights, and pleasures each time one returns to them.” But does the same apply to the majestic histories? he asked. Of course, he answered yes. One reason was style. “To read Francis Parkman on the discovery of the Mississippi or Macaulay on the siege of Londonderry is to encounter literary artistry of a kind not inferior to that of the great novelists.”³

Clive said the great historians create their own mental and moral universes, which readers must enter and experience. “The quality of their writing,” Clive said, “which turns out to exert the greatest power over us (and that may be an unexpected quality), is intimately related to each historian’s chief intellectual or personal concerns.”⁴

Historiographers keep coming back to the personal as the key to literary history, which is surprising because we often think of history as objective, factual, and free of personal expression, much as we used to think of journalism.

In my experiences interviewing literary journalists over the past 30 years, I’ve noted that they almost always have a personal connection to the topics they write about. These personal connections help define the meaning of “literary” in the term

² Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 227.

³ John Clive, *Not By Fact Alone*, p. 15-16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

literary journalism, and quite possibly in the term *literary history*.

In this paper, I will examine the personal connections of quality literary journalists in two works that are actually histories. The first is Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1988. The second is Michael and Elizabeth Norman's *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath* (2009). Historical literary journalism seems to be a special category with concerns that overlap journalism and history. I will also pursue some thoughts about the "literary" in history.

The "literary" quality of journalism puzzles people. For many years now, we have been using the term *literary journalism* to designate nonfiction works that share qualities such as immersion research, personal voice, elaborate structures, and accuracy, among other things. The practitioners of literary journalism are, at heart, master researchers and storytellers. In historical works by literary journalists, such as Rhodes' and the Normans' books, I would argue that the quality of the research is about the same as that of an academic historian. These are professional journalists, but not professional academic historians.

Certain qualities of the term "literary" reach beyond the research and writing techniques employed by journalists.

I envision the term *literary* as having at least three supporting legs.

First, a literary work is well written. I cannot imagine a poorly written volume getting labeled as literary journalism or as literary history, although fine writing is not enough by itself.

Second, the literary has symbolic elements that resonate with the reader or with the culture in which it is produced. As Joseph Mitchell once told me about the literary journalism at *The New Yorker*, "For one thing, the detail was important but it seemed to

lead to something.”⁵ It spoke of more things than just the topic at hand.

I prefer to focus here on a third meaning for literary, that the work is a form of *personal expression* and connection for the author. To put it another way, as Richard Rhodes told me, there are “deep structures” behind the author’s intentions. Authors of novels are generally assumed to be expressing their identities through their writing, whereas journalism has been perceived as work-for-hire addressing a topic with no personal expression involved.

Literary journalism almost always contains the first two qualities, and frequently the third. One need look only at the nonfiction works done for 30 years by Joseph Mitchell at *The New Yorker* to understand that his personal biography and history were expressed through his choice of subjects and his approach to the material.⁶

In examining these works, I have drawn from Kenneth Burke, writing about the interpretation of literature in 1941. Burke used identity as one of his primary tools. As he might have said, in these books we are watching a dance and wondering how to interpret it.

“The power to destroy the world...”

Richard Rhodes’s identity connections with his historical masterwork, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, reach back to his childhood. While almost any literary biographer can point to

⁵ Personal interview with the author.

⁶ On Mitchell’s work, see Norman Sims, “Joseph Mitchell and *The New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers,” in Sims, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (Northwestern University Press, 2008). See also James Silas Rogers, “Making Sense of *Joe Gould’s Secret*,” a master’s thesis at the University of St. Thomas; and James Silas Rogers, “Old Men in Graveyards: Joseph Mitchell’s Dialogue with Seumas O’Kelly,” in *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 47-52.

such connections, in Rhodes's case the psychological framework is quite striking.

When I first interviewed Rhodes in 1982, he told me he was working on a long-term project about the ultimate death machine. He had written about hunting coyotes and a novel about the Donner Party that ended in cannibalism in the Sierra Nevada mountains of the American West in 1846-47, so death was not a new topic for him. He said the theme that held these pieces together was “normal people confronted with tragedy.”⁷

When Rhodes was a young child in Kansas City, Kansas, his mother put a shotgun in her mouth and became a “casualty of the Depression.” She had three sons and was probably pregnant again, and they were on relief. Rhodes and an older brother spent years in boarding houses. After his father remarried, a “traumatic period” ensued because the stepmother was “borderline psychotic.” The state removed the two seriously underweight boys at age 11 and 13, and sent them to a boys' home. It was a farm where they slaughtered their own meat. “We ate a lot,” Rhodes said, but he also has visions of killing the animals.⁸ He went to Yale on a scholarship, but his writing career had to wait.

“The writing didn't start until the therapy started,” he said.

At first, he wrote a great deal of autobiography. “I was a child who observed adults being violent and cruel and observed the world being violent and cruel, on a farm. To balance that, I should say ‘who observed through a child's eyes’—a very bright child—in a world where intelligence was not much noticed or understood. 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 mop handle or a softball bat, when I found myself standing in a corner urgently straining to become

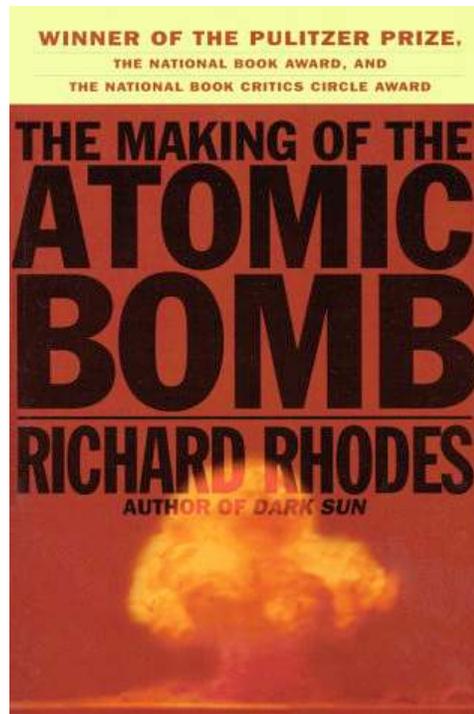
⁷ All quotations from Richard Rhodes come from personal interviews with the author.

⁸ Rhodes has written about these events in his memoir, *A Hole in the World* (1990).

invisible. I stored up a lifetime of observations out of experiences like that.

“And I still feel I’m just working out my responsibilities to that child. I used to have a recurring nightmare, especially during psychotherapy, that I had murdered a baby and buried it somewhere. People were digging in that area and might expose the baby. Then my irrevocable crime would be discovered. It was the horror at its being irrevocable, that I couldn’t change it no matter how clever I might be that made it such a nightmare. I would wake up terrified. I remember working through that in therapy two ways. The dead baby was me. And the murdering of the child was my responsibility to unearth this anger, and, in therapy, to work through it. But in the writing to turn it to some use.” Eventually he wrote about the Donner Party and other stories involving death. “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.”

The ultimate death machine turned out to be the atomic bomb. His book took several years to write and it won the Pulitzer Prize. Rhodes remembers hearing about The Bomb at age 8 in 1945. “I remember thinking, ‘My God, is adult anger *that* powerful? Can it so thoroughly destroy people?’” Rhodes’ anger from his childhood came together with The Bomb. “A symbol of that anger for me clearly is the atomic bomb: the power to destroy the world, which children somehow think somehow it’s possible to do.



“I understand the psychological roots: the ultimate disaster to the ultimate nice people: the whole world.”

The Making of the Atomic Bomb was Rhodes’s first book-length manuscript on the amazing human endeavors that produced such weapons. He followed with a cluster of books devoted to similar subjects, including *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1996), *Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (2007), and a remarkable compendium of angelic and demonic comments as technologies were changing over the past hundred years, titled *Visions Of Technology: A Century of Vital Debate about Machines, Systems and the Human World* (1999). As a sidelight, he published *Deadly Feasts* (1997) about the science surrounding bovine spongiform encephalopathy or “mad cow” disease, and *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (2003).

While he has written about many other things, death has drawn his energies like a psychological magnet. Behind the texts—where he rarely if ever reveals his personal motives—we can find deep structures in the work.

“Once the first shot is fired...”

Michael and Elizabeth M. Norman’s collaboration on *Tears in the Darkness* combined her knowledge of history and nursing with his knowledge of reporting, as well as a more personal connection in writing about war.

Beth had been trained as a nurse and holds a Ph.D. She is well trained in historiography. Michael had been in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War, and was later a reporter for *The New York Times*. “Michael went in it with a real personal connection, and I had the intellectual connection as a historian,” Beth said. “I was interested in the cross-cultural and Michael had the experiences in common.”⁹

She had written her dissertation on military nurses in Vietnam, which she turned into the book *We Band of Angels* (New York: Random House, 1999). “I was intrigued by the lives of women who were nurses, whose mission is to heal, in a war zone where the mission is to kill. The essential experience of being a nurse and dealing with young men in combat, and you’re far from home. I had studied World War One and the Somme. I wanted to do something on World War Two where something must have happened with 60,000 nurses in uniform. In the Philippines, it intrigued me that more nurses were captured there than anywhere else. Seventy-seven women Army and Navy nurses were captured, and three years later they all were released. They all survived. They still had deprivations, but they didn’t starve.”

The experiences of male soldiers, who were part of the largest surrender of American forces ever, differed from the nurses in dramatic and horrifying ways.

Michael’s motivation grew from his Vietnam experience and a long quest for an opportunity to write about war. “If you’re going to be silly enough to spend ten years writing a book,” he said, “you’d better have a well of passion to carry you through it. I’ve been trying to write the truth of war for thirty-five years,

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Beth and Michael Norman come from personal interviews with the authors.

and everything I'd written had been a failure. When Beth wrote *We Band of Angels*, on the very last draft, she asked me to go through and give her a line edit. I didn't know the full details. I thought to myself that the Death March was the worst war story I'd ever heard."

Michael had spent eighteen months as a Marine in Vietnam. In 1989, he published *These Good Men: Friendships Forged from War*. The book told stories about his unit and about his quest to reconnect with the men years after the war ended. It also pointed to the never-ending psychological impacts of war. His first paragraph began:

"Sometimes I still hear his call. It does not come in a dream—I do not dream anymore...Instead, it must be memory I hear, an old cry for help, echoing unanswered across all these years."

A little later, he recounts the real call that was imbedded in his memory from Bridge 28 over the Quang Tri River in 1968:

"His voice rang with shock at first, then turned weak with fear.

"NO!...NO!...NO!...Norman...help me...I'm hit..."

"He may have died for his country or for his god or for nothing at all. For a long time, I thought he died for me."¹⁰

Michael was recently diagnosed with a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a term used to name the psychologically disabling impacts of the Vietnam War. It had always existed under other names such as exhaustion, shell shock, and battle fatigue. Michael said, "I'd spent thirteen months in combat and that word 'hero' has always left me dyspeptic."¹¹

The experiences of American soldiers on the Bataan Death March and later as prisoners of war activated for Michael a quest that had consumed him for years. "If we could be

¹⁰ Michael Norman, *These Good Men*, pps. 1, 3.

¹¹ Michael Norman, "Writing Narrative Portraiture," *Literary Journalism Studies (LJS)*, Vol. 1, No. 1 Spring 2009, p. 53.

historically honest and pull that history down to the ground level,” Michael said, “then we could get to the truth of war.

“Our axiom throughout was: once the first shot is fired, everyone loses.”

In John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, and in Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, they found energy and spiritual qualities to use as models. Michael said his goal in examining historical documents is the story. “Not just anecdote,” he said, “but anecdote after anecdote that allows me to construct a story. Most of all, I’m looking for what Geoff Wolfe calls ‘actualities,’ which are moments that I can pull out of history and recreate on the page in such a way that what’s going on becomes an actual simulacrum of experience itself.

“The reader must enter the text to finish the text. That’s the stuff I’m looking for.”

“Story is the big thing,” Beth added. “In traditional history, context, and contact, and verification are important.” Beth made sure the historical traditions were followed as they discovered and recounted the stories.

“I don’t know what we’ve created,” Michael said, “whether it uses history or it is history. That’s the question for a literary journalist. Where is that threshold? Beth is the scholar; I’m the reporter tagging along. I’m not sure what defines the word history. I do know that the classic historians abhor dealing with live bodies. They’re really messy. They consider them incredibly unreliable. Our instincts as journalists are the exact opposite. Our first instincts are to head for those warm bodies because we know that’s where the passion is and where the literature will come from.”

Ben Steele, an American soldier captured on Bataan, played the most important role in the book as its central character—the central character, not a main character, Michael emphasized. Despite Steele’s horrible experiences of exhaustion, starvation, disease, brutality, sleeping in the open, thirst, horrifying transport on ships that were bombed and sunk by American aircraft—twice—and slave labor in a prison mining camp that

was within sight of Hiroshima when The Bomb was dropped, Steele was remarkably free of anger. Most of the other survivors of Bataan were filled with hatred—not unexpected for a group that had suffered as they did, and for whom the term PTSD had not yet been invented.

“In earlier interviews, we ran into a litany of hate,” Michael said. “I thought I didn’t want to write about this stuff. It’s just venom.” Besides, when there was so much hatred involved, the storytellers were likely to distort the tales they told. Steele was not that way. In addition, he had made sketches of the scenes he witnessed and he shared them with the authors. The line drawings create an emotional kick in the book.

“At some point early on you have to think about your motivations and your perspectives that you bring to the project,” Beth said.

“Maybe there’s another personal connection,” Michael added. “In the spring of 1998, Beth’s father and my dad died within ninety days of each other. In May, we met Ben Steele, who anybody would want to be their father. Did we do some surrogacy there? Probably. Both fathers were World War Two vets who served with Patton’s army after D-Day.”



Ben Steele, self-portrait in Ward 11, Bilibid prison hospital, Manila, 1943.

“Use all that is there to use...”

The concept of objectivity seems to stand in opposition to the personal quality in literary history and literary journalism. The gap is less wide than it appears. Many historical storytellers — and literary journalists for that matter—feel they deal in objective truth. One can certainly write in narrative form while acknowledging the principles of objectivity such as not being an advocate or propagandist, exercising balance and evenhandedness, and remaining open to persuasion from the facts encountered in research. In that sense, I would describe both *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* and *Tears in the Darkness* as “objective” accounts, even though they have strong personal connections for their authors.

Objectivity versus *subjectivity* is not the key distinction. As Peter Novick noted, in the last half of the twentieth century the struggle was between objectivism and *relativism*.¹² According to Novick, the real risk comes in assuming that if history is merely literature, then the truth of the matter is entirely relative and open to individual interpretation, or worse, to creative imagination.¹³

In 1941, Kenneth Burke applied his dramatic interpretation of literature to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The symbolic action in a poem, Burke said, is not a “purely subjectivist position,” and we might assume he would agree that neither is the symbolic action in literary journalism or in history. In order to “grasp the full nature of the symbolic enactment” in Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner,” Burke said, “we must study the interrelationships disclosable by a study of Coleridge’s mind itself.” While granting critics a free pass to ignore such private elements, Burke added: “But if his [the critic’s] interest happens to be in the structure of the poetic act, he will use everything that is available—and would even consider it a kind of

¹² See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pps. 11-16.

vandalism to exclude certain material that Coleridge has left, basing such exclusion upon some convention as to the ideal of criticism. The main ideal of criticism, as I conceive it, is to use all that is there to use.”¹⁴

In these works of historical literary journalism, we can look for symbolic action that, to paraphrase Burke, is doing something for Rhodes or the Normans.¹⁵ Journalists and historians both shy away from a term such as “symbolic” because it seems irrational or unreal. Burke objected to being called a symbolist, and in effect said that sometimes a house is just a house, and not, say, “the concealed surrogate for a woman.”¹⁶ He tried to make symbolism more concrete, by linking it with statistics, for example. There are borderlines between practical and symbolic acts, even if they are not always distinct. “Still, there is a difference, and a radical difference,” Burke said, “between building a house and writing a poem about building a house—and a poem about having children by marriage is not the same thing as having children by marriage.”¹⁷

Ultimately, Burke said, “The symbolic act is the *dancing of an attitude*.”¹⁸ This attitude—the author’s attitude—provides the basis for literature beyond the practical act. The attitude has been danced, and as critics we can look at the meaning and impact of the movements. We can look at the particular interpretation that an artist brings to the performance. If we are going to learn from Burke, who helped bring the concept of identity to literary criticism, we should examine “all that is there to use” in literary journalism and look at what the dance does for the dancer.

¹⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 22-23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9. Italics in the original.

Scholars who examine the literary nature of history, such as Hayden White and John Clive, find the literary quality is defined by “a deep level of consciousness” and “each historian’s chief intellectual or personal concerns.”¹⁹ The personal connection of the historian is one thing that makes the work literary, as it is with literary journalism. Clive commented that historians create their own mental and moral universes, which readers must enter and experience, all of which sounds a lot like Michael Norman saying, “The reader must enter the text to finish the text.”

I don’t mean to suggest that the personal expression in literary journalism or literary history would be entirely psychological in nature. It might symbolically express the author’s feelings about class, sociology, art, economics, athletics, philosophy or any other topic that may be part of a larger cultural conversation. The key is the personal expression coming from the author’s mind.

In examining Richard Rhodes’s body of work, and Elizabeth and Michael Norman’s *Tears in the Darkness*, I’ve focused on the unspoken structures of identity that stand behind the texts. The writers brought interpretations, perspectives, and their personal connections to the stories, the qualities that help make the works literary.

Critics of English literature, mainly fiction and poetry, have examined such things for decades. As scholars of literary journalism and literary history, we should be looking at structures of identity and we should be using “all that is there to use” to interpret the creative processes behind these forms of literature. In literary journalism and in literary history, the dance that gives rhythm and voice to the work grows out of the writer’s personal identity. That which achieves greatness says something to us, and also says something about the author.

¹⁹ See Clive, *Not By Fact Alone*, p. 39, and Windschuttle, *The Killing of History.*, p. 233 for comments on Hayden White.

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