

A Narrative of Collegial Discovery: Some Conceptual Essentials¹

David Abrahamson
Northwestern University, U.S.A.

The author recalls how collegial circumstances resulted in a set of conceptual essentials for teaching the study of literary journalism.

As I think back on my two-year term as president of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, I recall fondly having the opportunity to work with so many wonderful people in helping to develop this much-needed learned society. It has certainly been one of the highlights of my career in the academy, and for me there has been a very real sense of accomplishment. While I generally do not advertise my age, there is the feeling at my current time of life of the realization of much good fortune and many wonderful riches. Yet it is always a bit of a surprise when, just as you think you have ascended to the summit of accomplishment—when hubris suggests that you have done it all—that you discover something new. Or perhaps rediscover something you may once have known. In effect, you become a student again. It was while serving as president of this wonderful organization that I found myself for all practical purposes returning to the classroom to (re)learn anew. With your permission, I would like to share that experience with you, if for no other reason than it reminds us that, even when we are full professors, there is always something new to learn, and

in fact which may have long been there waiting for us to appreciate its full significance.

Bearing all of this in mind, then, I would suggest that few would argue with the proposition that literary journalism is a category of journalistic endeavor which aspires to go beyond the rendering of facts to explore other realms. In the words of one of its most accomplished practitioners, Ron Rosenbaum, “It isn’t about literary flourishes or literary references. At its best literary journalism asks the same questions that literature asks: about human nature and its place in the cosmos.”² One of the discipline’s founding scholars, Norman Sims of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, has written that “the term literary journalism . . . designate[s] works that share qualities such as immersion research, personal voice, elaborate structures and accuracy.”³ Moreover, John Carey, emeritus professor of English Literature at Oxford, has noted that one aspect that makes it so valuable is that, because it is a form of journalism, it “reaches millions untouched by literature [and so] . . . it has an incredibly greater potential.”⁴

Over the last twenty years, the academy’s engagement with literary journalism has increased substantially. Scholars such as the aforementioned, as well as others such as Thomas B. Connery, John C. Hartsock, and Richard Keeble, have made important strides in exploring the genre.⁵ In the view of many, a canon has been generally agreed upon, and most of the definitional issues have been dealt with—if not completely settled, then at least made somewhat less vexatious.

For me, however, there had long been a remaining problematic area, one that had not been studied in a way that I found applicable either to my own scholarship or to my teaching. What I am referring to here is some kind of analytical construct or perhaps a set of analytical components with which literary journalism might be both interpreted and taught. There have, of course, been thoughtful efforts by journalism scholars in this regard: Marcia Prior-Miller at Iowa State University has produced an interesting bibliometric taxonomy, and Douglas Whynott of Emerson College has explored the nature of structure in fine detail.⁶ The work of both has been commendable, but to my mind there is an underlying reliance on a form of reductionism with which I have never been comfortable. Not that it is *reductio ad absurdum* by any means, but rather I find it simply too fine-grained in its resolution to encompass the larger kind of questions that might usefully be asked.

What I have been looking for is some kind of schema with which to think both critically and pedagogically about literary journalism. And so in my mind’s eye, I have come to imagine a set of interpretive “tools” which

would prove valuable not only to me but also to my journalism students, and it is this that I hope other journalism instructors might usefully reflect on.

But first, I have a story to tell:

“It was a dark and stormy night.” No, in fact it was a clear and sunny afternoon in Evanston, Illinois when I first read an e-mail from a former colleague and dear friend, Michael Norman, a professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at New York University. If the name sounds familiar, it is probably because Michael’s most recent work of narrative nonfiction, *Tears in the Darkness*, spent two or three months on the *New York Times* best-seller list in 2009.⁷ Michael’s e-mail read:

I have need of suggestions for maddening internal reasons. I have to kill my signature course in nonfiction language and teach a graduate writing workshop next year. In the first semester the students will be getting the basics of reporting for long-form, plus some high-level grammar, also a sampling of the traditional forms, and some very basic research methods. In the past, the second semester of the course took all this stuff and just sent the students out into the field for fourteen weeks of assignments. Not me. Not with a chance to actually teach students something about literary journalism. So I have come up with a very simple paradigm. I’m calling it “Six Secrets: The Absolute Essentials of Great Storytelling.” Why six? Because in a fourteen-week semester, as you know, one only has twelve effective weeks. I want to spend two weeks on each concept. The first week will be a seminar wherein we read a few pieces that illustrate the concept and I attempt to codify some of its aspects. Then I give them an assignment which we will spend the entire second week work-shopping. Hence, six secrets. My only problem is: What are the six?

I am going to start with “Description,” but I am having trouble codifying the other five essentials. I have thought about having them do something with people, also about creating a sequence of action. Maybe an exercise in “Reporting History.”

As you can see I am spinning. Then there is the other problem: Finding key readings to illustrate the six concepts. So any advice would be greatly appreciated. Thanks in advance for helping me noodle this.

Regards, Michael.

Imagine, if you will, receiving such a correspondence from a deeply admired friend. Beyond the unavoidable but admittedly ego-driven sense of challenge, there was also the hopeful possibility that I might clarify my *own* thinking on the subject, an outcome which I was certain would be useful to me because I teach similar courses. There was also another element to Michael’s message that excited me: I was not the only addressee. The salutation on the e-mail—I hope less than half in jest—read “*Praeceptors Honorifici*.”⁸ You will

note Michael's use of the plural, which was correct in this instance because the second addressee was a mutual friend, the aforementioned and widely respected Professor Norm Sims. "Ah, the plot thickens," the storyteller might say. Astrophysicists might call this the "Three Body Problem." Professor Sims is one of the founders of literary journalism as a field of academic study. He has produced seminal scholarship on the topic for twenty-five years, as well as assisting generations of younger researchers to find their place in the field. A man of notable intellectual generosity, my friend Norm was certain to respond to Michael's inquiry. But more on that later.

I found myself inspired by Michael's note. And so, veils lifted, and my own answer to the "six secrets" question came to me over the course of a few days of reflection. The six elements I think journalists need to know are, at least on the surface, deceptively simple: character, setting, plot, theme, voice, and structure.

For those who may be nonplussed, some background: I have a master's degree in journalism, in addition to my other degrees (a bachelor's in history and a doctorate in American Civilization). The significance of my master's is that I was trained as a hands-on journalist and spent many fruitful years so occupied. This is important to understand when considering the path of my learning curve in arriving at the above, and I hope it is something other journalists and teachers of journalism might benefit from. As a further aside, and an important one, it is clearly worth noting that my answer cannot be regarded as truly original. For me it may have been something of a new discovery. Or perhaps it is a rediscovery of something that I had long forgotten. I honestly cannot remember. That is because such constructs have long been employed in English departments in the study and teaching of fiction⁹; moreover, a number of books that focus on the art of storytelling address the same question.¹⁰ Nevertheless, I must confess that my answer to the six-secrets question was new to me—which may be evidence of my own intellectual naiveté, as well as how far removed the study of journalism has become from the study of literature.

The result of my reflection as a renewed student were these six analytical implements—character, setting, plot, theme, voice, and structure—which anyone contemplating literary journalism might usefully bring to bear. I envision it as a toolbox of categorizations which might prove of value in the divergent acts of writing, reading, and teaching. The six elements of analysis are generally not taught in the traditional journalism curriculum, and one can only conjecture on the historical reasons why this is so. This is critical to bear in mind for those of us, like me, who were originally trained as professional journalists: These are work-a-day tools that, while perhaps

taken for granted in other sectors of the academy, have gone largely ignored in the teaching of journalism praxis. Most important for me is that they are tools that nonetheless provide a means for both the conceptualization and analysis of most literary journalism.

A brief bit of explication might prove helpful for those who like me did not learn this when we were diligently internalizing the Five Ws and the inverted pyramid of traditional journalism.

- **Character:** The people in the story. They can either be fully realized, three-dimensional personalities, complete with inner lives. Or they might be ciphers or members of a group defined only by a collective noun, as, for instance, in many of Tom Wolfe's sub-cultural explorations.¹¹ It depends, of course, on the story.
- **Setting:** This is not only where the story takes place, but also encompasses the realm of the piece's descriptive efforts. In some tales the setting is of paramount importance, and the piece's descriptions are executed in fine detail. Think, for example, of much of the work of the *New Yorker's* Lillian Ross, with her jeweler's eye for the perfect descriptive facet.¹² In other pieces, just the opposite is true. It is as if the story unfolds in the mind of the author and possesses no sense of place. Such pieces are, in effect, deracinated of any physical location or descriptive attribute.
- **Plot:** This is the answer to the question, What happened? Plot equals action, and this often has an important role in defining the architecture of the story's narrative arc. Since action perforce occurs in a chronological continuum, plot also helps specify both the order in which things happened, as well as the order in which action or events are revealed to the reader—which is not necessarily the same thing.
- **Theme:** The piece's thesis or central argument, theme is the “moral of the story,” what the work is *really* about. In my experience, journalism students often find this a problematical concept. Marinated in a misleading belief in objectivity and rigorously trained in early reportorial classes to uncover “facts,” many students have difficulty dealing with thematic aspects in their own work. In the professional socialization, they have, in effect, been taught to abhor a premise, no matter how impossible this may actually be. As a result, they often feel uncomfortable at first blush with the concept of theme or even the validity of a central authorial assertion.
- **Voice:** There are two aspects here. One is the style in which the piece is written—“the sand and lime of language,” in the wonderful

words of Louis Chevalier, with which the prose is constructed.¹³ The second aspect relates to the author's choice of narrator. One way to think of narrator is to think of it as the voice speaking into the reader's ear as he or she reads the piece. Narrators can come in a number of forms. They can be omniscient or naive, reliable or deceiving, a transparent voice or a character in the story. Or, as in much of Ernest Hemingway's nonfiction, even the hero of the tale.¹⁴

- **Structure:** The actual architecture of the piece, structure may in some instances be the most important analytical tool of all. By way of analogy, for many writers of many pieces, deciding on matters of structure before the actual writing is similar to the black-and-white value drawing many artists do before embarking on the finished painting. Knowing the size, shape, order, and transitions between the story's major elements can often be the key to the successful mastery of the tale. Nicholas Lemann, the dean of Columbia University's School of Journalism and a frequent *New Yorker* contributor, often uses structure with telling effect in his literary journalism. For example, in a *New Yorker* piece entitled "The Kids in the Conference Room" on the culture of the management consultancy McKinsey known for its presumed omniscience, it is only at the end of the piece that the reader realizes that the article itself has been written, somewhat slyly, in the arrogant format of a McKinsey report.¹⁵ An additional instance of Lemann's skill with structure is his book, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, which—in five parts covering four decades after World War II—moves from Clarksdale, Mississippi to Chicago to Washington, D.C., then back to Chicago and finally returning once again to the Mississippi Delta.¹⁶

Another interesting point here is that often pieces are not purely linear with regard to time. Not only can the narrative move backward—via flashbacks—as well as forward, but it also can proceed at different rates of speed. This being the case, I have often thought that the phrase "narrative arc" misleadingly suggests a perfect parabolic path. I admit that it is merely a matter of personal preference, but, because it allows for backward loops and segments of acceleration and deceleration, I find "narrative trajectory" a more accurate description. A perfect example of this non-linearity is Tracy Kidder's recent book, *Strength in What Remains*.¹⁷ It covers 15 years in the life of a young Burundian fleeing the horrors of his country's *genocidaires* to his life as refugee in New York City to his graduation from medical school. The narrative, however, moves forward, backward and even sideways in time,

always with the seamlessness that has long characterized much of Kidder's work.

Character, setting, plot, theme, voice, and structure. Every undergraduate who takes an introduction to literature course must learn some version of these, even if memory might dim with the passage of the years.

And so, like an innocent who first experiences the magnitude of the cosmos in the stars of the evening sky, I wrote to Michael. In response to his request for published pieces to illustrate the six "secrets," I provided the following articles. None, I confess, are by non-American authors, but I count on you to forgive my provincialism.

For Character, the agreed gold standard has long been the *New Yorker* profile, and so I chose two from the magazine by Larissa Macfarquhar: one on the intellectual provocateur Stanley Fish and another on Hollywood uber-producer Brian Glazer.¹⁸ In addition, I added a lovely profile of Ernest Hemingway's former boat captain by Stephen Kinzer of the *New York Times*.¹⁹

The narrative form of foreign correspondence often seems particularly suited for the foregrounding of setting. To that end, I chose two pieces by Chris Chivers of the *New York Times*. One was a short piece for the paper written after spending a night with a small group of Marines in Zagarit, Iraq.²⁰ The second, written for *Esquire* magazine, is, I believe, the definitive story of the horrific hostage events in Beslan, North Ossetia in 2004.²¹

For plot, I chose a piece by Dan Baum. Written for the *New Yorker*, the title is "Deluged."²² The story deftly weaves two threads of action: the generally mendacious behavior of the New Orleans Police Department during Hurricane Katrina, and their hostile tracking of Baum as a reporter investigating the storm's aftermath.

To my mind, few writers today have a surer command of theme than Joann Wypijewski, a long-time former staffer at *The Nation* magazine. My personal choice was two examples of her extraordinary long-form thematic gifts: from *The Nation*, "GE Brings Bad Things to Life,"²³ and from *Harper's*, "A Boy's Life."²⁴ In the latter piece, a retelling of the story of Matthew Shepard, the author was able to interview at length both the two assailants and their girl friends. In a thematic *tour de force*, Wypijewski presents an argument for the possibility that Shepard was killed—crucified, actually—not because his assailants thought he was gay, but rather because they were fearful that *they* might be gay.

For voice, I went to two extremes. Lillian Ross, a fixture at the *New Yorker* since 1948 and still a staff writer there today, is a master of the transparent narrator. Moreover, she has a wonderful ear for language and eye for gesture.

I chose her “Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue,” a set piece of fly-on-the-wall observations of privileged New York City high schoolers.²⁵ My other selection was Scott Anderson’s “Prisoners of War” from *Harper’s*, an honest yet chilling personal reflection on the lure of war reporting.²⁶

Bil Gilbert’s “Mirror of My Mood” from *Sports Illustrated* in the mid-1970s was my choice to demonstrate structure.²⁷ The story operates on two planes: one that tells the tale of the author’s relationship—in truth, a love story—with his dog Dain; the other, about the historic relationship between humans and dogs over the last five millennia. The story moves effortlessly forward and backward in time, and there are occasions where the narrative is set aside in the interest of exposition. Of special note are the transitions between sections; some are so deftly handled that the reader can be two or three sentences into a new section before being aware that they have left the preceding one.

In any event, I sent these thoughts, along with the above examples, to Michael. And copied Norm Sims. Gentleman that he is, Norm copied me with his answer to Michael, which read, in part:

Michael, I teach something similar to your storytelling course. As you suggest, describing the setting would be one element. Characterization is another, because these are characters, not people. A third is the action, the narrative, the arc, including the dialogue . . . whatever you call it. On top of those elements, I teach them how to digress from the narrative and return, which might correspond to what you’re calling exposition, although I prefer the term digression. (John McPhee described it to me this way once: You’re on a canoe trip in the Boundary Waters lakes of northern Minnesota. It’s evening. Out on the lake you hear a loon. That’s a perfect moment for a digression about loons, but when you’re done, you return to the lake.) Structure is another element that you don’t often see in a story, but it’s doing work nevertheless. And the last element I teach is voice, but that’s probably the hardest to teach. So I’ve come up with six, but there are of course other elements of storytelling and of literary journalism. Best, Norm.

With all these e-mails crisscrossing in the ether, I waited for whatever replies would be forthcoming. Norm’s was the first to arrive. The chivalrous sort that he is, he wrote: “Impressive list of readings. I may borrow a couple. We seem to think alike on this subject!” The last sentence, just read, ended with an exclamation point—one which I choose to interpret as *celebratory* rather than an indication of *surprise*. In my reply back to Norm, I wrote: “Thanks for the kind words. And, yes, I was amazed—and gratified—to see how much our responses to Michael overlapped.”

The circle was closed with a concluding note from Michael to both Norm and me: “My Goodness, Gentlemen,” he wrote. “I don’t know a lot, but thank Zeus, I know people who do. Fabulous suggestions. Twixt the two of you, I can now write the syllabus. Bon Mots, Michael.”

End of story.

So we were like a group of boys staring up at the night sky and discovering, in our innocence, the wondrous magnitude of the narrative cosmos. But perhaps the tale just told reveals more than just academic naiveté. I believe it does, and I hope that you, dear reader, agree. For one thing, we must always remind ourselves that we are *always* students. For another, the tale speaks to the disciplinary blinders we sometimes do not realize that we wear. When the journalism academy was in its formative stages a century ago, its well-meaning professors, pathfinders really, set out to establish the rules of journalism. Not literature but journalism. The mission, however, implied an exclusion, and in doing so those early pioneers may have lost sight of something our colleagues in literature take for granted. After all, in the end we are talking about a rhetorical enterprise that presents many different faces. Even more humbling, I find that all of these elements were developed and recognized in classical Greek drama—Euripedes, Aeschylus, Sophocles—as well as in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

In sum, the theme of this essay is two-fold. It is the story of a collegial search over what may be old ground for some. But it is also a search for and the serendipitous finding of a set of tools as old as antiquity—and, at the same time, a tale of a return to a state of student-hood. The six tools can be employed to think about literary journalism: character, setting, plot, theme, voice, and structure. Or, if you, like me, have a preference for mnemonics, “Can Sublime Prose Transform Vexatious Siblings.” In any event, it is my hope that they are tools the journalism academy might benefit from if—as I also hope—we are to have a journalism that is richer in texture and deeper in insight in its exploration of the human condition.

David Abrahamson is a Professor of Journalism and the Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, where he founded and has taught a seminar in literary journalism since 1997. The author of Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical and The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects, he is the general editor of an award-winning historical series at the Northwestern University Press entitled “Visions of the American Press.” He is the immediate past president of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies.



Endnotes

1 This essay is intended, at least in part, to serve as a coda to the author's recently concluded term as the president of this journal's parent organization. It is adapted from a lecture presented at the School of Journalism at the University of Lincoln, Lincoln, U.K. in May 2010. The author would like to express his gratitude to his University of Lincoln hosts, Professors Richard Keeble and John Tulloch.

2 Ron Rosenbaum, in an interview with Tim Cavanaugh, *Feed* magazine: <http://www.feedmag.com/re/re196_master2.html. Accessed 1 September 2003.

3 "Norman H. Sims, "Producing an Effect: Literary Journalists and a Personal Connection to History," presented at the European Society for the Study of English Biennial Conference, Turin, Italy, 25 August 2010.

4 John Carey, ed., *The Faber Book of Reportage* (London: Faber, 1987), xxxviii.

5 See Norman H. Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008) and Norman H. Sims, ed., *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008, reprint); Thomas S. Connery, ed. *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: A Guide to an Emerging Genre* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1992); John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); and Richard Keeble and Sharon Wheeler, eds., *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter* (London: Routledge, 2007).

6 Marcia Prior-Miller, "Research Review: Issues in Magazine Typology," *Electronic Journal of Communication/La Revue Electronique de Communication* 4:2-4 (December 1994); and Douglas Whynott, "Observations on Nonfiction Book Structures," *Literary Journalism*, 2:3 (Summer 2008), 12-18.

7 Michael Norman and Elizabeth Norman, *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

8 Translation from Latin: "Honored Teachers."

9 For examples of teaching texts on the subject ranging from the 1930s to this year, see John T. Frederick, *A Handbook of Short Story Writing* (New York: F.C. Crofts, 1936); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Michael Meyer, *The Bedford Introduction to Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing* (10th ed.; New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2010).

10 See Jon Franklin, *Writing for Story* (New York: Penguin, 1994) and Mark Kramer. *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 2007).

11 For two worthy examples of Wolfe's master of the technique, see *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Picador/Macmillan, 2009) and *The Right Stuff* (New York: Picador/Macmillan, 2008).

12 For a useful anthology of some of Lillian Ross's best pieces, see *Reporting Back: Notes on Journalism*, (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2002).

13 Louis Chevalier, *The Assassination of Paris*, trans. David P. Jordan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

- 14 For heroic narrators, few writers in my view have surpassed Hemingway. The best collection of his journalism can be found in William White, ed., *Byline: Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).
- 15 Nicholas Lemann, "The Kids in the Conference Room," *New Yorker*, 18 October 1999.
- 16 Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
- 17 Tracy Kidder, *Strength in What Remains* (New York: Random House, 2009).
- 18 Larissa Macfarquhar, "The Dean's List," *New Yorker*, 11 June 2001, and Larissa Macfarquhar, "The Producer," *New Yorker*, 15 October 2001. NOTE: All of the examples mentioned from this point forward in this text can be downloaded from the following link: http://www.davidabrahamson.com/WWW/Readings/10-05_Toolbox/
- 19 Stephen Kinzer, "The Old Man Who Loved the Sea, and Papa," *New York Times*, 29 January 2002.
- 20 C.J. Chivers, "Marines Get the News from an Iraqi Host: Rumsfeld's Out. Who's Rumsfeld?" *New York Times*, 10 November 2006.
- 21 C.J. Chivers, "The School," *Esquire*, June 2005.
- 22 Dan Baum, "Deluged," *New Yorker*, 9 January 2006.
- 23 Joann Wypijewski, "GE Brings Bad Things to Life," *The Nation*, 12 February 2001.
- 24 Joann Wypijewski, "A Boy's Life," *Harper's*, September 1999.
- 25 Lillian Ross, "Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue," *New Yorker*, 20 February 1995.
- 26 Scott Anderson, "Prisoners of War," *Harper's*, January 1997.
- 27 Bill Gilbert, "Mirror of My Mood," *Sports Illustrated*, 24 March 1975.
-