

■ Blais, Campbell, Conover, Newkirk, Norman + Wilentz: The Perfect Title ■

# *Literary Journalism Studies*

Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 2017



Before the Sketch:  
The Sentimental Roots of  
Literary Journalism

*J. M. Dallen,*

*The Journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies*

# Literary Journalism Studies

The Journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies

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~~Looking for the Best Title~~

~~The Best Title~~

~~The Flawless Title~~

~~The Killer Title~~

~~The Perfect Title~~

## ~~LOOKING FOR THE PERFECT TITLE~~

A good title is a work of genius. I have no hesitancy in saying that, for it is genius whether it is the inspiration of a lucky moment or the painful elaboration of a faint idea through an hour of deep thought.

— Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, Jewish-American socialist writer, atheist thinker, social reformer, publisher (1889–1951)

I actually really suck at naming books, so lots of years ago, readers were sending in their ideas for titles, and what we realized is that they were smarter than us. So we thought, Hey, go for it. So now we have a contest every year.

— Janet Evanovich, American writer (1943–)

I have on my bookshelf a series of books with opposite titles: *The Alpha Strategy* and *The Omega Strategy*; *Asia Rising* and *Asia Falling*; *Free to Choose* and *Free to Lose*; *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*. Visitors love the collection.

— Mark Skousen, American economist, investment analyst, newsletter editor, college professor, author (1947–)

# *Scholar Practitioner Q+A . . .*

## Searching for the Perfect Title

David Abrahamson  
Northwestern University, United States

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Titles are no doubt a great source of stress for writers—a quick Google search will turn up pages and pages of articles offering advice on the subject. Much of the advice is conflicting, and the only general consensus seems to be how important a good title is. Titles have to sell the book by sounding good while also giving the reader an idea of what’s to come; they have to be catchy, short, and informative, all at the same time.

To make matters more complicated, it’s not always possible to know before publication how well a title will work. We can laugh now at the fact that *The Great Gatsby* was originally titled *Trimalchio in West Egg* or that *Of Mice and Men* was originally titled *Something That Happened*,<sup>1</sup> but we can’t know how Fitzgerald or Steinbeck felt about those working titles.

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, a publisher whose Little Blue Books pamphlet series sold hundreds of millions of copies, knew well the power of a good title. He would pull books from his list when their sales weren’t meeting his expectations. Then they’d go to “The Hospital” to be rejuvenated with new titles before rerelease. A few editorial assistants would brainstorm a potential list, and one of those would be tried.<sup>2</sup>

The process could work quite well: *Fleece of Gold* sold 6,000 copies in 1925 but the following year, rereleased under the title *The Quest for a Blonde Mistress*, it sold 50,000 copies. Sometimes, even Haldeman-Julius’s young daughter would help; after reading the book *Privateersmen*, she summarized that it was about seamen and battles, so it was retitled *The Battles of a Seaman*.<sup>3</sup>

How enticing those titles seem point to something else that can't be predicted: how well a title will age. Eighteenth-century novel titles were short summaries in themselves, such as the full title of Daniel Defoe's story of Robinson Crusoe, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates* (1719).<sup>4</sup> The greater detail was necessary at a time when novels were still entering the cultural mainstream, and it would take more than a word or two to pique a reader's curiosity.

More recent classical works often have titles derived from other works. Popular sources include Shakespeare (*Brave New World*; *Pale Fire*), the Bible (*The Sun Also Rises*; *Absalom, Absalom!*), and the works of major poets (*Of Mice and Men*; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). Now, it's common for works to have single-word titles—but the pressure to summarize, or least capture the essence of, the work within nevertheless remains.

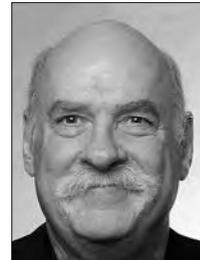
Those articles online do offer a few modern suggestions to creating titles, but take any or all of the advice at your own risk. Methods range from A/B testing<sup>5</sup> to random title generators (which can generate titles as inane as *The Missing Twins* to as nonsensical as *The Teacher in the Alien*).

Common title structures make something like a random title generator possible; the titles can sound real, albeit not always. And because there are no copyrights on titles, some small subgenres of fiction do see titles recycled every few years. But picking a title that truly fits takes a bit more work.

Six award-winning authors, also university faculty teachers of writing literary journalism, were asked to share what they have learned from their experiences in titling their books.

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## The Inspiration Season

Amy Wilentz

University of California at Irvine, United States

It's worth thinking about other writers' really good titles when you start brooding about naming your own book. Why do they work?

Here's a title for all time: *The Way We Live Now*. A novel by Anthony Trollope, true. But it can be repurposed for narrative nonfiction, anthropology, political science . . . and it has been. It's endlessly useful, because it's empty, yet urgent (that *Now*), and we all want to have our lives explained to us.

Here's another: *War and Peace*. Again empty and waiting to be filled with the meaning of the book, yet gigantic and important. We care right away. Some writers, feeling self-important and at the top of their game, choose titles with just one abstract word, as in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. And at the end of the book one is left wondering why, other than the drumbeat repetition of the word within the text.

But other times, a one-word title happens to be just right, such as William Shawcross's brilliant *Sideshow*, about the desolation and killings associated with the war in Vietnam that did not take place in Vietnam. To be fair, *Sideshow* has an explanatory subtitle—*Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*—but nonfiction often does.

My favorite title for a novel (other than the idiosyncratic and inimitable *Moby-Dick*—which has a much ignored explanatory subtitle, *or, the Whale*) is *Bleak House*, by Dickens. In *Bleak House*, you barely notice Bleak House itself, and when you do see what Bleak House is, you realize the house isn't bleak at all, it is bright and beautiful and reflects the lovely soul of its proprietor. It is the site of happiness, and a reconstituted family, and an unbreakable

but profoundly assaulted love. Bleak House is where the main protagonists of the book gather and we see them there in their best light. Dickens could have called the house and the book *Sunnyvale*, but *Sunnyvale* wouldn't have interested us, and more important would not have conveyed the darkness and power of the novel. It wouldn't have made you feel, on putting the book down, finally, that all England, and especially London, is in the grips of an oppressive system that grinds humanity down. *Bleak House* does that.

And plus: the title sounds good. Real estate almost always provides good title. Chatwin's *In Patagonia* comes to mind, or Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

Depends on the place, though. Mississippi is evocative, Patagonia is mystical. But not all places work. Try *In Rhode Island*. No. *Life in Staten Island*. I don't think so. D. J. Waldie, who wrote a great book about suburban anomie, had the sense not to call it *In Lakewood*, but rather *Holy Land*. With the explanatory and seemingly contradictory subtitle, *A Suburban Memoir*.

When I am writing a book, I'm always trying on titles as if they were eveningwear for my workmanlike piece of writing. One is too elegant, another too transparent, another too old-fashioned, another, somehow, boxy or too contemporary.

When I was writing my first book, I was living in Haiti and reporting on Haiti and writing about Haiti. I had this little apartment in a small complex for foreigners that was expanding daily. I was alone when I wasn't out reporting, and I had a Hermes Rocket typewriter, white plastic, very small, that clacked and binged a lot. I'd put it on the "dining room" table, facing a big window that opened on the canyon at the bottom of which I lived, amid garbage and birds and rats. I was working my way through reporting and note taking. Every day then in Haiti (and every day now) was filled with event. I was pushed and pulled from one thing to another, always exhausted, always underfed. For years, I couldn't figure out how to feed myself in Haiti.

And all the time, like a little gnawing anxiety, I was wondering what I should call this thing that, as I grew thinner and thinner, was growing fatter and fatter, into a sizable pile at the side of my Rocket. Whenever I looked up from my work, I could see the house gecko eating trails of ants. He wasn't hungry. The "kitchen" was behind me, old coffee sitting on the "counter" in a silver Italian espresso maker. There was nothing in the "fridge," a machine that must have dated from the 1960s and suffered frequent lapses for lack of electricity.

On Friday afternoons, drums outside my window announced dances or get-togethers or religious services. I'd be writing up my notes from the day, and the drums would get going, evening settling in, the smell of cooking charcoal burning, and then a rainstorm would come pounding down on us,

whipping the palms and the banana trees. I loved that moment because I was inside. The ceiling was tin and thunderous. I'd get up from my chair of labor and go stand at the window, watching the rain and wind make everything dance, including the garbage, as the waters turned the dribble of the canyon into a broad river carrying mango leaf and banana refuse and plastic and glass and bones.

One evening, standing there, watching another flood go by, I said to myself, ah: the rainy season. And then I said to myself, ah: *The Rainy Season*. And the title was born, and thus the feeling of the entire book.

Of course, the book wasn't about the rainy season or any particular rainy season. Its subtitle was *Haiti since Duvalier*, and it was about a time of doubt and struggle in the country, during which it rained in a way that was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It rained dramatically, unabashedly, violently, brilliantly, passionately. And the title seemed to express something I'd felt about Haiti: how the rains disoriented me the way the place did; because they and it were foreign to me, and not yet arranged in my mind to be known and navigable.

It always takes me time to come to a title. *Martyrs' Crossing* is my novel about an emergency faced by a Palestinian toddler and his mother at a checkpoint between Jerusalem and the occupied territories. I finished it before I had a title.

The working title (there's always a working title, or three . . .) was *Checkpoint*, but I felt that that made it sound like a thriller by Michael Crichton. Although it did have elements of a thriller, that title was too limiting and—worst sin of all for a title—promised something other than what the book delivered.

I offered my editor many possible titles for this book, titles I culled from the Old Testament (hey, I figured, it's a book about the actual holy land). But my editor was having none of it. I said to her, "Hemingway did it." She replied, in her tart way: "Are you Hemingway?"

I wasn't.

Then one night my husband, who had been a reporter in the Middle East while I was writing the book, said, "How about *Martyrs' Crossing*?" And I had that moment one can have, with a good title, where everything seemed to come to a stop, and it was clear that this was the title the book had been waiting for.

I tried to ignore the fact that it sounded, to my American ear, just a bit like a highway warning sign. Also: martyr is hard to spell. Also, I hate having any punctuation in my titles. But it seemed to me to sum up the problems raised and the story told in the book.

This was in the spring of 2001. It was in the early days of Amazon ratings for books, and I used to go on to Amazon to see what the book's number was and what people were saying about it. Then I thought, "Let's see if it appears anywhere else on the Internet," and I Googled the title. (Maybe I Internet Explored it . . . it was early days.)

After a few references to the book, another listing appeared. I clicked on that: It was a story about the infamous Israeli Army shooting, captured by French television, of twelve-year-old Mohammed al-Dura while in his father's arms at a checkpoint in Gaza the Israelis called Netzarim junction—and the Palestinians called Martyrs' Crossing. I remembered being so sad about this kid when he was killed, and feeling his connection to the boy in my novel; but I had no idea that he'd died at a crossing point that shared its name with my book. History made the title deeper, more political, and just plain better. Not that anyone knew the connection but me. Still, I knew it.

I can't give pointers for titles of books. It doesn't really work that way; it's all about inspiration and a feeling for the totality and broad meaning of the book. My most recent title, *Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter from Haiti*, came to me as an inspiration. At the Monnin art gallery in Pétiön-Ville, just outside Port-au-Prince, I had seen a very moving and beautiful flag of the kind used in Vodou ceremonies, a huge green sequined thing with a forest god depicted on it, waving. As I stood before this sweet, friendly little god of Vodou, I was still in the middle of reporting my book, and writing it (I tend to do both simultaneously) and standing there in front of the flag, I thought of the early reference in my book to "Fred Voodoo," which was what British journalists used to call the Haitian man in the street, affectionately, but disparagingly, too. Outsiders should stop seeing Haitians as Fred Voodoos, was one of the points in the book. The book also, I'd started to notice, had begun to take on a kind of valedictory flavor, as I wandered the rubble-strewn streets of a city I had once known so well, notebook in hand, and contemplated what my life would be, would have been, could ever be, without Haiti.

Hello, the little Haitian god seemed to be saying with his wave. And bye-bye. Farewell, Fred Voodoo. So there was the title, in a flash. He welcomed me in and pushed me away; that was Haiti for me. If you ever see the book you'll notice that that little god is on the cover, waving to you, too.

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## Mom, My Editor, and Rolling Somewhere

Ted Conover  
New York University, United States

The search for a perfect title is, of course, collaborative. It's you and your editor, but it's also your best friends and the publisher's sales team. The search for the title of my first book, about riding freight trains with hoboes, lasted for months—for the entire time I wrote it. And the night I mailed it in—the typewritten manuscript, pre-computer—my mother had me to dinner in Denver. The good news: I was finished! The bad: except for the title.

Over dessert we brainstormed. I knew my ideas weren't working and soon she could see that I didn't like hers, either. "So tell me some titles of actual books that you *do* like," she said. (Dialogue here is reconstituted to the best of my ability.) I told her I liked the title of Jack London's story collection about hoboes, *The Road*. I liked *Hard Travelin'*, a biography of Woody Guthrie, and I liked a book of photos and interviews called *Riding the Rails*. Of all the books about hoboes I'd read, I said, getting distracted, the best was a collection of semi-autobiographical stories from the Great Depression by a man who had been homeless named Tom Kromer. I told Mom how the book was dedicated "to Jolene, who turned off the gas."

"What was the book called?" she asked.

"*Waiting for Nothing*," I answered. "Doesn't that say it all?"

The wheels were turning in Mom's head. "How about *Rolling Nowhere*?"

she suggested. It struck me as perfect—the railroad-specific version of *Waiting for Nothing*. I added the subtitle, *Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*. Coffee was poured; such was my relief that it might have been champagne.

By the time the book came out, I was in graduate school in England. The Viking Press airmailed me two early copies. Holding that first book of mine in my hands was one of the highlights of my life, except . . . for the subtitle. The publisher had changed it from “Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes” to “A Young Man’s Adventures Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes.” I got on the phone to New York. “What’s with ‘A Young Man’s Adventures’?” I demanded. “That’s not what we agreed on.”

My editor, who otherwise had done a great job, sounded defensive. “We just thought that described it better,” she said. “You *were* young then.”

The book came out a year later as a Penguin Travel Library paperback. A few years after that it went out of print. But with the success of *Newjack*, Vintage Books, my new publisher, agreed to bring *Rolling Nowhere* back. That’s when I learned that you can sometimes change a subtitle. So for many years, the complete title has been what it was meant to be all along: *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes*.

*Coyotes* wasn’t my first choice for my second book, which recounts a year of travels with Mexican migrants; my first choice was *Mojado*, which means “wet” in Spanish. It was slang used jokingly by Mexicans themselves, which is why I liked it. But my editor put the kibosh on that. “How do you pronounce it? Mo-JAY-do?”

“Mo-HA-do,” I corrected him.

“Well, forget it. Books with foreign titles don’t sell.”

I don’t remember how we came up with *Coyote*, except that it had the benefit of being a word in English as well as Spanish. That it didn’t refer to the migrants but instead to the smugglers didn’t bother my editor, who thought it conveyed an atmosphere—and finally I agreed.

A few months before publication, he sent me the Vintage Books catalogue. There was my book, with an evocative photograph by Sebastião Salgado on the cover, and the word *coyotes*, plural, emblazoned across the top. Again I called New York. “What’s with *Coyotes*, plural?” I asked.

“Oh,” said my new editor. “It turns out that a novel is coming out at the same time from another house called *Coyote*. We added the ‘s’ so there wouldn’t be confusion.”

“Why didn’t *they* add an ‘s,’?” I demanded.

“Don’t worry, Ted—it’s basically the same,” he assured me.

My next book, about Aspen, was with the same editor. We agreed on that title, *Whiteout*, with its connotations of loss of perspective, of wintertime, and of cocaine. There were no surprises except for the first cover art he showed

me: a photo of two women in bikinis and fur coats standing near the Little Nell gondola. After my flat rejection, he sent another one, of a photo of a snow globe they had commissioned just for the occasion. Inside the globe was the title of my book, chiseled out of a snowy mountain. I was very happy.

*Newjack*, about my ten months as a New York State corrections officer, got its title from inmate slang for a rookie officer. That's an idea I like: a title derived from the argot of a subculture. My new editor and I agreed upon it immediately. The only problem it has ever caused: Occasionally a reader confuses it with the movie *Newjack City*.

I had a new editor again for my next book, about roads. We struggled and struggled until one day I blurted out the idea I'd been husbanding for a while but was afraid to say out loud. "How about *The Routes of Man*?" I said.

There was silence. "Did you just pull that out of your hat?" he asked.

No, I said—I'd had the idea for a while. But I was afraid it might sound sexist. He didn't think it did. And like me, he appreciated the echo of the classic photo book by Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, and the double-entendre with "roots of man." The only hitch with it has been that some people pronounce routes as "routs," and miss the double meaning. Ah well.

For my most recent book, which is about how to research and write the immersive nonfiction that I'm best known for, we considered the titles *In Deep*, *Inside*, *The Art of Immersion Writing*, and *The Deep End*. But after a long discussion over the phone, my editor and I agreed on *Going Deep*. As I hung up, I thought it might be a good idea to check online for books with that title. Already there was a memoir about football called *Going Deep*, as well as romance novels, gay and straight. So we moved the phrase to the subtitle, settling on a simple label for the title: *Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep*.

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*Ted Conover is an author who combines anthropological and journalistic methods to research social groups. His research has led him to experiences such as riding freight railroads across the western United States and working as a corrections officer. Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing (2000), based on his time as a corrections officer, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in general nonfiction and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He is the author of five other books and is a professor at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute.*



## Out in the World, Titles Find Me

Deborah Campbell  
University of British Columbia, Canada

One thing the experience of writing each of my books has in common is this: I remember exactly where I was when I found their titles.

In the first case, I was in the Middle East, conducting fieldwork, and writing at the same time. That day I was at a friend's apartment, working on the fourth or fifth chapter of a book that very nearly wrote itself. It took me three months to write, a rare state of grace I have never since recaptured. It was early evening, mid-autumn. The sun had set and I was working by lamplight. I had gone to look for a pair of scissors, for what purpose I have no recollection. I had just picked them up and turned back towards whatever task I had in mind when the title appeared, seeming to me to be as much a physical object as the scissors. *This Heated Place*. That was what I was writing about: the Israel-Palestine conflict, the view from the ground for those who lived it. I had just written a line that included that phrase: "Conflict is the leitmotif of this heated place." As a title it seemed both literary and quiet, like the book itself. It stuck, as did most of what I wrote in that first draft. The book was published, with that title, one year later, though at the time I had no inkling of its ever finding a publisher.

Second books are said to be the hardest to write. The next one took five years, not including a year and a half of fieldwork. The book is about the arrest of my fixer in Syria while I was with her, and my search for her. The numerous drafts stacked on the floor of my office attest to the effort it took for this book to coalesce: They reach well above my knees.

For the first several years the book had a title I loved. But as the book evolved, I found that the title required increasingly long explanations, since it no longer made sense to anyone but me. The book had outgrown that working title—but still, I wasn't prepared to abandon it. It had been with me each day of the journey, like the old grey sweater I wore in for years despite the elbows wearing through and the sleeves coming unraveled. That I don't wish to divulge it, despite queries from this journal's editors, illustrates how attached I remain—part of me maintains that I will use it for another work.

I remember the day the new title came. I was walking home from the university where I teach. It was mid-afternoon, and I was watching the trees signal the change of seasons. I wasn't thinking about writing, I was simply absorbed by the world around me, which is often when ideas come. As I was about to turn a

street corner, four words appeared: *A Disappearance in Damascus*.

A disappearance is an event that is at once action and mystery. It bespeaks narrative momentum, and a certain edge-of-your-seat suspense. There was a sense of drama to the title that reminded me of Gabriel García Márquez's nonfiction book, *News of a Kidnapping*, which a friend had given me when I confessed I was having trouble with my own book. The new title had what the original title lacked, or might have had before the book was written: a quality of inevitability.

Scarcely a single line in the book itself came with such ease. Writing, my second book taught me, is mainly work. But as you do the work, there are sometimes moments of serendipity, moments of grace.

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*Deborah Campbell is a writer who has published in eleven countries and six languages. Her literary journalism incorporates extensive fieldwork in places such as the Middle East, Russia, Cuba, and Mexico, and, she has won three National Magazine Awards. Her 2016 book, A Disappearance in Damascus: A Story of Friendship and Survival in the Shadow of War, won the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize, the largest literary award for nonfiction in Canada, and was selected as a New York Times Editors' Choice. She is a lecturer at the University of British Columbia, where she teaches creative nonfiction.*




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## This Menagerie of Titles

Pamela Newkirk  
New York University, United States

The title for my 2015 book, *Spectacle*, came to mind early in the process of researching the story of a young African who in 1906 was exhibited

in the Bronx Zoo monkey house. The title, I believed, not only captured the shocking exhibition in a world-class zoo of Ota Benga, the caged African boy, but also the ravenous public response. During the month of September 1906 nearly a quarter-million people flocked to the zoo to see Ota Benga, who was taunted and at times attacked by raucous crowds. The exhibition provoked sensationalized headlines across the country, including at the *New York Times*, where editors defended zoo officials against the handful of outraged critics. The spectacle set in stark relief the prevailing bigotry of the era and of the city's leading men of science and public affairs.

However, as we neared publication my editor was unhappy with the title. She argued that it was too vague and instead proposed one that indicated that the book was about a man who was exhibited in the zoo. Among the suggestions were: *Man in the Monkey House*, *Scandal in the Monkey House*, *An Unnatural Event in the Monkey House*, and *A Man amongst Monkeys*.

I countered that the book was not merely about the weeks Ota Benga spent at the zoo. The book explores his life and the racial attitudes embedded in science, history, and popular culture that culminated in his exploitation. I believed that the shameful episode was merely a microcosm of race during the era. For weeks we tossed around other titles and subtitles but none, to my mind, were as fitting as *Spectacle*. She finally relented and we agreed that a subtitle was needed to give readers a better sense of the contents. After weeks of brainstorming we agreed on "The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga," which evoked the stranger-than-fiction story of Ota Benga's remarkable life that went beyond his captivity at the zoo.

The working title for my first book was *The Color of News*, which examined how race overtly and covertly influences news coverage. The book more specifically explored the uphill battle of black journalists to integrate mainstream newsrooms and present more balanced portraits of black people. The book, based both on archival documents and interviews with more than one hundred journalists, took readers behind the scenes to uncover some of the contentious newsroom debates around race and news coverage.

I opened the first chapter with a quote by W. E. B. Du Bois that read: "Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."<sup>6</sup> I thought the quote conveyed my aim to lift the veil on newsroom operations to tell the untold story of the battles waged by black journalists to more fairly depict black life.

My agent at the time honed in on the words "within the Veil" which she said could signal that the book was a behind-the-scenes look at race in the newsroom. The full title became *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media*.

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*Pamela Newkirk is a professor of journalism and director of undergraduate studies at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga* (2015), her latest book, won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, Nonfiction and the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation Legacy Award. Her 2000 book, *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media*, won the National Press Club's Arthur Rowse Award for Media Criticism. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from New York University and graduate degrees from Columbia University.*




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## The Title Keeps Him on Track

Michael Norman  
New York University, United States

Working a manuscript, I try to keep an eye out for a good working title, a word or phrase I can hang on the wall of my mind, reminding me that my job is to capture the essence and nature of the topic or the collection of characters I'm writing about.

You don't find such a title; it finds you. As I'm writing or sifting notes or reading for background, I'm subliminally asking myself, "What is this book about?" Then, when I have hundreds of answers to that question, most of them unsatisfactory, I narrow the question and ask: "What is this book *really* about?" And the answer to that should be the working title. Simple, right?

Of course not. A title should also be much more than a description of the book's contents or a statement of its theme. It should be a suggestion, a powerful prompt to readers that the well-crafted work of narrative nonfiction they have in front of them is also about the universe just beyond the book. It urges readers to look for more and think about more than what's in the pages.

All of this takes place in that private space where writers struggle through

the process of creating a book. It's a wonderful place, that space. Quiet, insulated against the rest of the world. Plenty of room for grand ideas, room to let the narrative mind wander until it happens upon the perfect title.

Then you finish the final polish and hand the manuscript to the publisher, and the wonderful place where you created the book is gone. The "book" becomes a "product." From the writing room to the factory floor. For me, the title has always represented a kind of tipping point between those two states of mind, or to put it in more scholarly terms, the two phenomena.

Every professional writer wants sales. Writers know that to help achieve those sales, their books should carry an intriguing, powerful, elliptical, punchy, shocking, salacious, clever, or otherwise engaging title. Sometimes that title is the working title, or a refinement thereof, and sometimes it's an editorial directive. Often it's a conflation of both.

Here are two examples of the effort to find a perfect title.

**M**y first book was a memoir, a look at my time serving as a young man in a Marine Corps combat unit in Vietnam. The title: *These Good Men*. I was wary of the title at first because, at the time, the Corps was using the advertising slogan, "We're looking for a few good men." But the phrase "good men" interested me. What did it mean? "Good," how? At killing people? There was no goodness on the battlefield. I was thinking of "good" in other, more philosophical terms. So I started reading Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> Lo and behold, there was my "good": The feeling of comradeship that is as powerful as love. That's what the book was about. I simply added a demonstrative plural pronoun—short for "these particular men"—and *These Good Men: Friendships Forged from War* became the title. The subtitle, as I recall, was the publisher's. And I wasn't thrilled with it.

My aim is to avoid clichés and threadbare idiomatic expressions, easy titles I call them, and the subtitle *Friendships Forged from War* struck me as clichéd, wrong-headed, and melodramatic. Friendship does not, in any sense, arise from a blast furnace. And war is not a caldron. It's a funeral pyre. A broken metaphor all around. The only thing the subtitle had going for it was the alliteration. When all else fails, call for the cavalry of assonance and consonance.

I was an English poetry major in college, so I also thought about the poetics of the three words—the phonemes, the meter, the images. To me the substrata of music produced by the words in a title (or in any phrase or sentence, for that matter) can be as important as the meaning. The title is the reader's first encounter with the book, and it should have the power of a siren song, one that suggests the essence of the book and acts as a powerful invitation to engage it—which is to say, buy it.

A title can be a summary or coda or an elegant suggestion of what is to come. For me it was also a way to introduce the idea of many characters as well as a characterization of them as a group. I think a writer has to consider the conflation of purposes a title represents and explore the implications of the title for each of those purposes. Again, my first consideration was literary.

I came to my title early, which is to say as I was about to sit down and begin the manuscript. If the title reflects all or most of the themes in the book (conflation without confusion), it helps to keep me on track. It's like standing on a precipice for a moment, surveying the full landscape of the book just before you sit down to write.

I work hard to come up with a title early, rather than let the publisher begin the process of the title search. On my second book, a co-writer and I spent months wrangling with our editor, going through hundreds of titles; yes, hundreds. And here's the kicker: The title we ended up with (*Tears in the Darkness*) was the very first title we had proposed.

**T**he book is a cross-cultural look at America's first land battle in World War II, a battle that turned out to be the largest defeat in American military history. The book took on the myths of war and tried to unmask them. (*Tears in the Darkness*, by the way, came from one of the hundreds of interviews we did for the book, a war book with a shifting point of view.) One Japanese character, describing his commander's reaction to mass casualties, used the word *anrui*. Japanese expressions often have literal and figurative meanings that serve as complements. In this case, the idiom of *anrui* was "a broken heart," but the literal translation was hidden or unseen tears, hence *Tears in the Darkness*.

Not perfect, but it works.

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## No More Body Parts

Madeleine Blais

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In writing, everything counts, and even something as inherently short and seemingly inconsequential as a title requires heavy lifting. It is often the final order of business, finding a title that works, ideally on more than one level, functioning as a metaphor and a mini poem. Titles are the first selling tool for a book and, as such, the publisher retains veto power, often just as well because authors are sometimes too close to the material to pick a snappy title on their own. The original title for Anita Shreve's novel *The Weight of Water* was the less lilted *Silence at Smuttynose*.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of titles that work, from fiction and memoir, include *A Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, thanks to their sass and their originality. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shakes up the gene pool of our expectations. Variations have followed, such as *Lipstick Jihad* and *The Kabul Beauty School*. *Running with Scissors* has brilliant generic quality; it applies to any childhood narrative filled with risk and danger. Mary Karr's memoir, *Lit*, works on three levels, describing the author when she was drunk, describing her as she sought spiritual insight, and as shorthand for the business at hand: literature.

Often, one well-chosen word can do the trick. *Atonement*. *Waiting*. *Prep*. *Monkeys*. *Lucky*. *Saturday*.

How about *Jaws*? Peter Benchley had been mulling the idea of a shark terrorizing a resort community for years, carrying in his wallet a newspaper clipping about a 4,500-pound shark that had been captured off the coast of Long Island in 1964 to prove to any potential publishers that the story was not so preposterous: It had an antecedent in the world of fact. He kept a running list of possible titles, each more clunky than the next, including *The Edge of Gloom*, *Leviathan Rising*, and *Tiburón*. He also envisioned *Jaws of . . . Despair*, *Anguish*, *Terror* (take your pick), shortening it at the last minute to the one-word wonder by which the book (and the movie) became world famous.<sup>9</sup>

Among my favorite student-generated titles is that of a memoir written by a young man about the struggle to acknowledge his sexual orientation. For years he struggled to articulate out loud the simple sentence, "Mom, I am gay," feeling that until he did he could not move forward in his life. His title: *Four Words*. Another title, about a father who was always on his way out the door: *Going, Going, Gone*. An older returning student wrote about how as a child in the sixties in an African-American community in Boston, hers

was the only family to go on camping trips. Everyone else she knew traveled by train or by car to see relations in the South or in Chicago or Harlem, but her father loved his pop-up camper and all the equipment it entailed and for weeks before they left each summer, he fussed over his lanterns and his mess kits and his two-burner grill stove, much to the amusement of neighbors who took borrowed pleasure in the tableau and saw his enthusiasm as an annual marker in their lives as well as his. Every year when the family set forth, with fewer and fewer black people in sight until finally there were none, the student remembered being befuddled by the road signs as she traveled north to New Hampshire, especially one sign in particular.

Why did her father keep speeding by it? Why didn't he get in trouble?  
The title of her memoir: *No Passing*.

As for my books, the title of my collection of journalism, *The Heart Is an Instrument*, came from one of my subjects, Tennessee Williams, who said to me during a series of interviews over three days in Key West in February of 1979:

I used to be kind, gentle. Now I hear terrible things, and I don't care. Oh, objectively, I care, but I can't feel anything. Here's a story. I was in California recently and a friend of mine had a stroke. He is paralyzed on the right side and on the left side and he has brain cancer. Someone asked me how he was doing and I explained all this and the person said, "But otherwise is he all right?" I said, "What do you want? A coroner's report?" I never used to react harshly, but I feel continually assaulted by tragedy. I can't go past the fact of the tragedy; I cannot comprehend these things emotionally. I cannot understand my friend who is sick in California and who loved life so much he is willing to live it on any terms.

Sometimes I dream about getting away from things, recovering myself from the continual shocks. People are dying all around you and I feel almost anesthetized, feel like a zombie. I fear an induration, and the heart is, after all, part of your instrument as a writer. If your heart fails you, you begin to write cynically, harshly. I would like to get away to some quiet place with some nice person and recover my goodness.<sup>10</sup>

The title *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle* was also inspired by a writer, Emily Dickinson, the poet who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, the setting of the high school basketball team whose championship season I covered. Her famous poem claims "hope is the thing with feathers,"<sup>11</sup> though Woody Allen has a joke about that thing with feathers is his nephew in Zurich who thinks he is a bird.<sup>12</sup> I, obviously, had my own definition.

For *Uphill Walkers*, a family memoir, I had two goals—to avoid body parts ("heart," "muscle") and to be less verbose. As children, we walked to school (not very far, definitely wearing shoes). We were designated, on the way home,

as part of the uphill patrol. Given my family's slow trudge upward after receiving a devastating blow (my father died suddenly leaving my mother with five children, eight and under and one on the way), the trajectory seemed to mirror our fate. In our hometown we were the mysterious Other—the frequent target of whispered conjecture, “How do they manage, after all?”

**M**y most recent memoir is about the loss of a beloved summerhouse on Martha's Vineyard, hardly the stuff of tragedy. And yet when it came time to part with this ramshackle dwelling surrounded by water (“blue gold” in realtor's parlance) I was filled with that deluge of mixed emotions that signals something worth writing about. The book, published on July 4, 2017, contains the following passage:

The new owners could of course imagine their own future happiness, but they could not see, and therefore could not appreciate, the human history preceding the purchase, all the lives that grazed ours and the ones that truly intersected, the noisy arrivals and departures, the arguments and the recipes, the ghosts and the guests, crabs caught and birthdays celebrated, clams shucked, towels shaken, lures assembled, bonfires lit, the dogs we indulged, the ticks we cursed, the pies we consumed, and, through it all, both close by and in the distance, the moving waters (as a poet put it) at their priest-like task. They could not see the depth of the life lived here during the summer for all those years.<sup>13</sup>

The title, *To the New Owners*, comes from that excerpt. I must confess, to my amazement: Everyone connected to publishing who hears the title claims to love it. Why? I don't know. I do know that my son said if he had written the book it would have been called *Not for Sale* and the entire text would have consisted of two words, “The End.”

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “24 Classic Books’ Original Titles.”
- <sup>2</sup> Haldeman-Julius, “The Hospital,” 139.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–41.
- <sup>4</sup> Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, title page, reproduced in Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Keymer and Kelly, 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Ferriss, *The 4-Hour Work Week*.
- <sup>6</sup> Du Bois, “The Forethought,” v.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomson, trans. *Ethics of Aristotle*.

<sup>8</sup> Shreve, "The Weight of Water."

<sup>9</sup> Gilliam, "Peter Benchley: The Father of *Jaws* and Other Tales of the Deep."

<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Williams, as quoted by Blais, "Tennessee Williams in Key West," para. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Dickinson, "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers," 116.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Without Feathers*.

<sup>13</sup> Blais, *To the New Owners*, 18.