

A Need for Accuracy: The Importance of Truth in Narrative Non-Fiction

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Abstract- *Narrative non-fiction is a form of writing which combines portraiture and self-reflection with reportage and critical analysis journalism. It is perhaps the most advanced form of writing as it aims to create interesting stories out of the lives of real people. However, in this aim to be interesting, writers dangerously tread the fine line between fact and fiction. This paper aims to underline the importance of being truthful in this genre of writing.*

Index Terms- *Narrative, Non-fiction, truth, accuracy, creative non-fiction.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Jim Murphy proudly said “I write narrative nonfiction, creating lively scenes through action and the use of quotes from firsthand accounts, all based on rigorous research. If I say a character leaned against a fence on a windy day, then I have at least two sources to back up these details.” This one quote beautifully summarizes my paper which will discuss the need for accuracy in narrative non-fiction.

Narrative is a form of storytelling. It is a technique that produces a visceral need in the reader’s mind to want to know what happens next. It is a way to present thoughts and events in a coherent and logical manner which makes it fascinating to listen and read. The stories do not have to be chronologically arranged and sometimes breaking it up into parts draws the reader into the storyline even more. A narrative differs from traditional storytelling in that it follows a theme and not chronology. In most cases, narratives require a classic character or a problem typical to all fairy tales and need a narrator to help shape the story. Different from storytelling, a narrative provides direction and is always in the background and helps the reader through the story. Perfectly done, it allows the story to unfold and the reader to meet the characters as and when they become relevant in the storyline.

Non-fiction writing is a form of content creation in which the writer assumes responsibility for the accuracy of the information. This is different from a story where the writer does not have to ensure any connection to reality. Non-fiction is appreciated as a form of writing because people

assume it to be factually correct and not a figment of the writer’s fantasy. This element of believability in the writing allows readers to view the book through a very different lens than they would have if it were fictional. Non-fiction is exciting for the writer as it can take a variety of forms from journals to memoirs to documentaries. Annie Dillard mentioned in her introduction to “The Best American Essay 1988”, “Literary non-fiction is all over the map and has been for three hundred years. There’s nothing you can’t do with it. No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own form every time”; (Baker) these two elements come together to constitute narrative non-fiction. Narrative non-fiction I think can be described as the perfect intersection between storytelling and journalism. Creative non-fiction, Gonzo Journalism, The Fourth Genre and Literary Journalism are some of the other names that the narrative non-fiction genre is referred by. This genre has existed for a long time, from Montaigne and his essays in the 1500’s to the World War II book, ‘Hiroshima’. Narrative non-fiction generally ties “narrative telling with poetic techniques; Combines portraiture and self-reflection with reportage and critical analysis” (Root). It is “based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with a special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of non-fiction writing” (Lacey) It is perhaps the most difficult form of writing as it attempts to make interesting storylines out of real people. As Robert Vare said in the J. Anthony Lukas Prize Project non-fiction Writers Conference on May 6, 2000, narrative non-fiction is “possibly the highest form of writing, that harnesses the power of facts to various techniques constructing a central narrative, setting scenes, depicting multidimensional characters and, most important, telling the story in a compelling voice that the reader will want to hear.” (The State of Narrative non-fiction Writing.)

II. DISCUSSION

I see narrative as the genre of the next few years. Poetry often addresses a narrow audience and goes above the head of the general public. Fiction is reluctantly moving toward a slow death, as stated by Will Self and other similar columnists, and is becoming an art that writers often discuss

but is not what readers are looking for. (Self) Short stories, too, are somewhat like poetry in that they are not able to completely engage the mind in a limited amount of words. However, non-fiction has its own charm and is able to completely capture the attention of a vast majority of readers as it demands readers pay attention in a way that fiction cannot because of how real the stories are. However, all discussion about narrative non-fiction is incomplete without a discussion on truth in non-fiction. There are two sides to this issue. One side believes that it is a writer's responsibility to make sure that what they are writing about is true to the best of their ability. This means accuracy in reporting facts, opinions, and memoirs. The other side believes that it is sometimes okay to add a few elements of drama into the story as this is a form of literary journalism and the goal is a greater truth.

Personally, I believe that writers should just report what is true. I think it is the job of novelists, poets and artists to enlighten us about the greater truths of life as they can create illusions that help enlighten revelations in our life. This, however, gets complicated when fiction writers start using facts in order to make their stories seem more real. They do a thorough background analysis with regards to their plot and they put in detail to make us believe in the plot's reality.

Historically, non-fiction has always had strayed a little from the absolute truth. Reporters, columnists and news writer soften felt that they could make up details to create more interesting stories. In 1934, Stanley Walker, then editor of the New York Herald Tribune, spoke about this issue and said that "It is true that, among the better papers, there is a general professional condemnation of fakers. And yet it is strange that so many of the younger men, just coming into the business, appear to feel that a little faking here and there is a mark of distinction. One young man, who had written a good story, replete with direct quotation and description, was asked by the city desk how he could have obtained such detail, as most of the action had been completed before he had been assigned to the story. "Well," said the young man, "I thought that since the main facts were correct it wouldn't do any harm to invent the conversation as I thought it must have taken place." The young man was soon disabused." (Walker)

In the United States, the writers have often been dangerously flirting with the fine line between what is true and what is fictitious. This shift has been galvanized by the public's shift toward infotainment which basically means information has to be served in the form of entertainment which adds to the confusion. The fact that Tina Brown facilitated a merger of Hearst, the news company, with Miramax, the movie studio, shows how these two worlds are coming together. (Hearst) A lot of new channels are now exaggerating and

sensationalizing their news and there's always a story about heroic acts which often remind me of soap operas and super hero movies. Even in books, writers like John Berendt have begun to put to get her events and use unreal characters in his so-called "non fiction" book and only offer an explanation in a small note at the back of the book. In his biography of Ronald Reagan, Edmund Morris invented new characters to make the story more interesting. (Morris) The list can go on.

This web gets even more complicated when we consider how fictive our memory is and that how we remember things is not exactly what it was like. Thus, memoirs and anecdotal fiction books are fundamentally flawed in that it is generally a combination of a few detached facts which are tied together by our imagination to produce a coherent set of thoughts. Thus, this problem associated with recalling things from memory affects all kinds of writers to a certain extent.

With this background, post-modernists come wielding their ideological axes and argue that there is no such thing as fact and there are only our perceptions of reality which are based on our social, ethnic and geopolitical backgrounds. Thus, some top journalists when questioned about reporting just truth reply back with a defensive "what truth?" In this complex mess, I find it difficult to find a simple answer to this question. Writing would be so much easier if there was a set of universal rules which allowed writers to tread the fine line between fact and fiction and decide what truth is. These principles have to be picked out from a plethora of sources which include works of prominent writers like John Hersey and Anna Quindlen, debates on the topic and from standards of ethics. Hersey was very vocal in his opinion on separating fiction and non-fiction and he said that a journalist should be able to say that "None of this was made up." (Denzin) Hersey also brought an important point to this debate about how subjectivity and selectivity often are evident in journalism. He went on to say that not showing even a small part of all of the information gathered can allow for subjectivity to set in. Even though subtraction of a small amount of information can lead to a small amount of distortion, the end piece is still non-fiction. However, when new facts are added, then it is a wholly different ball game. That, I believe, is when we cross the line and dive into the fictional world. So, adding any new material including dialogues, characters and scenes moves into the realm of fiction. Thus, we have two conclusions: that writers should not add information and deceive readers. By not deceiving readers, we mean that it is the writer's duty to show information just in the way it took place. By producing non-fiction work, they are supposed to stay close to truth to the best of their abilities. Anything which does not help the reader come to the truth, even it is not on purpose, should be

avoided and writing should be very transparent. Writers can learn not to deceive and not to add by working through some of the following strategies. Firstly, writers should silently observe from the outside and, as Katherine Boo said at the Mayborn literary non-fiction conference, should practice “hang out journalism”. (Katherine Boo’s 15 Rules for Narrative non-fiction -- Now This Is a ‘Must-Read’.) Thus, writers should just hang out in their subject area and almost be invisible and be a part of everyday life there. Using a similar corollary from science, being unobtrusive helps avoid the “Heisenberg effect” according to which observing an event alters it. (Encyclopedia of Research Design) This is applicable in most cases apart from those in which it is imperative for the writer to bring the spotlight onto himself. Some instances like these include when the writer wants to confront the people in power and the writer’s secret weapon is his ability to bring up questions that need to be answered. Another point of concern is the subject of anonymous sources. I believe that this is a powerful tool which writers often use to introduce new opinions into stories. For a lot of reasons, I think that anonymous sources should be disallowed from non-fiction unless the information is very sensitive and can cause harm if the identity of the source is revealed. Whistleblowers, victims of unfortunate accidents and people suffering from a certain kind of disease are examples of people who might absolutely need anonymity. There is also a need to make sure that facts stated are rechecked to measure their accuracy. In this fast age with works of non-fiction being churned out rapidly, often the fact-checking process is sped up and this results in a lot of inaccuracies. This is especially relevant in the case of newspaper stories which have to be in real time and hence they are often released before the sources can even be confirmed. Obviously, this shortage of time results in decisions in haste which can then lead to shameful mistakes. Another issue at hand is that there is often a doggedness in writer’s opinions and the belief that they are always right. Katherine Boo again had mentioned this is her ‘15 Rules for Narrative Non Fiction’ where it was important for writers to get off their high horse and be open to other viewpoints. This stigma has even resulted in a belief in the industry that it is impossible to reach the truth. It is believed that with more research, you get closer to the truth but you never reach it. In this context, it is of utmost importance to believe in the presence of different views and opinions and writers must be open to constructive debates and discussions. The writers’ self-centeredness creates a desire to just make profits and think about one’s own career and forget about the genre as a whole. It is then very easy to make up facts and incidents to make the stories more appealing to the masses. This tradition of fact-checking and making sure that the sources are reliable can be traced to newspapers from our great city of Boston. There was a newspaper called Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick which said in an article in the

17th century that “...nothing shall be entered, but what we have reason to believe is true, repairing to the best fountains for our Information.” (McBride) My belief is that this should not be limited to newspapers and should apply to all kinds of non-fiction. In my eyes, even small tweaks like editing a photo to make it look better or cropping it in a way that it hides the context is also a form of deceiving the public.

Now, writers who want to technically stay true to the facts then start using controversial techniques with an attempt to make their stories more interesting. One strategy as mentioned earlier is that of composite characters. This is basically writing a story in such a way that it tricks readers into thinking of different characters as one person. This, I believe, has a place only in works of fiction. Joseph Mitchell, for example, often used composite characters in some of his articles and then came back to call them non-fiction works. (Dean) This technique is now in use even today. Mimi Schwartz in her book ‘Thoughts from a Queen-Sized Bed’ had used composite characters and defended it by saying that it was to protect the privacy of the characters in the memoir. This was a story about three of her friends who were looking at a divorce and she combined them all into one character who she met over coffee. While she did have the best interests of her friends in mind, it does mislead me as a reader because I was approaching it as a story about one friend, not three. Also, these conversations might have happened in very different circumstances like at a bar or during a girls night out and I’d keep that in mind as a reader while empathizing with the friend’s struggles. (or should I say the friends’ struggles?)

Another technique that is used by writers is that of altering the reader’s perception of time. As time is a man-made concept, it is easy for writers to maneuver this and make long durations seem short and vice versa. This is again unacceptable as the reader’s opinions might often be based on the time and chronology of occurrences in the book. John Berendt had mentioned in the author’s note of the book ‘Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: a Savannah Story’ that “Though this is a work of non-fiction, I have taken certain storytelling liberties, particularly having to do with the time of events. Where the narrative strays from strict non-fiction, my intention has been to remain faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of events as they really happened.” (Berendt) In doing so, even though he was perfectly honest with the reader, he cannot write a book with both fiction and non-fiction elements and expect the book to come under the non-fiction genre. These two genres are black and white and there is no grey area. A true work of non-fiction I think is Miller’s ‘King of Hearts’ in which he says that “This is entirely a work of non-fiction; it contains no composite characters or scenes, and no names have been changed. Nothing has been invented. The author has used

direct quotations only when he heard or saw (as in a letter) the words, and he paraphrased all other dialogues and statements— omitting quotations marks—once he was satisfied that these took place.” (Miller)

Another interesting technique is using interior monologues where the writer supposedly knows what a character is thinking and feeling. This is tricky and I think should be allowed only when the writers are very close to the characters and the characters are able to affirm that this is what they were thinking. Mark Kramer from Boston University had said that there should be “No attribution of thoughts to sources unless the sources have said they’d had those very thoughts.” (Kovach) Without confirming that this is exactly what a character was thinking, writers should not be allowed to use this as thoughts are invisible for a reason. While these assertions are a little harsh, I believe this to be useful to firmly separate fiction from non-fiction and this brings us closer to always speaking the truth while writing non-fiction. Thus, my assertions can be summarized in two main points. Firstly, that the writer should not invent any elements in a story. Secondly, that the writer should not aim to deceive the reader in any way. This is done by reporting stories just as they are. The duty of removing any sense of make-believe in the story falls onto the writer. This means that any facts reported in the story must be rechecked to confirm their accuracy. Lastly, writers should approach writing with humility and believe that it is possible for them to be wrong which then makes them pay more attention to being correct. This all comes together for one of the great truths of life that there is a small amount of knowledge in the world which we can know and that is what must be written about in non-fiction. The great literary critic John Carey immortalized the importance of truth and the non-fiction genre in these lines “Reportage may change its readers, may educate their sympathies, may extend—in both directions—their ideas about what it isto be a human being, may limit their capacity for the inhuman. These gains have traditionally been claimed for imaginative literature. But since reportage, unlike literature, lifts the screen from reality, its lessons are—and ought to be—more telling; and since it reaches millions untouched by literature, it has an incalculably greater potential.

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