

## At Home in the Many-roomed House of Misfits

Anthea Garman  
Rhodes University, South Africa

*An appreciation of Robert Boynton's keynote address, "Notes toward a Supreme Nonfiction," IALJS Conference, Tampere, Finland, 17 May 2013*

As somewhat of a misfit in academia, I find myself drawn to people, who like myself, straddle two worlds, using each to talk to, critique and enhance the other, and who care a lot about making explicit in teaching just what is going on behind the scenes in both.

So I was drawn to and immediately interested in Robert Boynton's opening keynote gambit that journalism itself is not quite at home in the university, that it fits uneasily and that it continually seeks a space of its own. Somehow this seems fitting to me, that it should be a restless pursuit, that it should seek and seek and never quite find in this place in which it's been uncomfortably included. (But it's also fitting that we refuse to exit this space or agree with those who think us not quite intellectual or theoretical enough to be their peers.)

Even more, I like Boynton's commitment to teach in such a way that he creates a home of many rooms and that he invites students to roam them, explore them, find nooks and crannies in them, and even build on rooms of their own and decorate them with their own styles. I like the idea that a profession (as in what we "profess") as unrooted as this, can be as welcoming and embracing as that. What a lovely contradiction.

Boynton argues for multiple different uses in the different spaces of the house of journalism, and I find myself emphatically agreeing and applying this to the idea of "literary journalism": there cannot be one type, one norm, one definition. This must remain multiple, open, changing, reflexive, contextual. As a newcomer from the South to the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, it seems to me this is an important tension at the heart that this organization must hold almost with a sacred reverence.

To turn to Boynton's explanation of the Portfolio Program he has instituted at New York University with Jay Rosen, there is much here that excites a fellow teacher. I take from this a few seminal ideas:

The recognition of time's value and what it takes for someone to learn, experiment and grow—too seldom do we let the time it takes dictate the timetable, it's so often the semester, term or even week's availability that tells the student what she will do and subsequently how she will learn. It's brave to let the vastness of time intrude into the course outline.

And of course that leads directly to the pedagogical value of failure. Experimentation and failure are crucial in learning. Of course we must build this in; of course we must find the courage to teach this way.

The idea of “creating” beats—imagining new types of stories, new organizations of journalistic thinking and new routines of doing—as someone who also works with students in our local community newspaper, which has a 142-year history (of which the past was most glorious and the present a little tarnished), the most stultifying of our challenges is the entrenched beat system and its associated routines. In a conversation yesterday with Professor Jeanne Abbott of the Missouri School of Journalism (who is visiting us for a week) we re-imagined (based on the issues, ideas and desires of our local community) a whole range of new beats to help us talk better to and for our readers, and to put education at the heart of our enterprise. This is an exercise we should do regularly in journalism, every now and again when we suspect we're missing the point or fallen behind the curve.

Memoir and participation in stories: this gave me pause when re-reading Boynton's keynote, mainly because as I write we have begun the long-form journalism component of our writing and editing students' final course in our degree program. As happens every year, some of our students are drawn to exploring their own circumstances and psychologies. (The thought that they can get personal in journalism suddenly has powerful currency and they often take the opportunity with both hands.) Again this year we have students writing about their absent or distant fathers; we have investigations into what it is to be a young white Afrikaner in South Africa now; and we have students crossing the divide of our town into the townships where the poorest live to explore what it's like not to have running water, electricity and a job. We could become jaded as teachers and urge the next year's intake to avoid these topics. But if we're listening, we hear that these are crucial investigations for these young people, that they are deeply imbedded in their working out who they are as individuals, writers, journalists. And that this course opens and engages them as individuals and reporters in ways they don't find elsewhere in their journalism degree. And that this is necessary, important, to be taken note of and incorporated into their learning process when they do this course. There is much more going on than therapy by happenstance. This process teaches them powerful things about the difference between life and writing life, and as Boynton says, makes them feel like they're “doing literary journalism” rather than studying it.

Another interesting provocation I take from Boynton's explication of his teaching methods is that editors are as important to study as writers and that all our programs of teaching writing focus to exclusion on writers. His point that "editors do at least as much to shape the literary landscape as writers" is indisputable. This is an important challenge to pose and to engage. Why should the mobilizing energy of those who commission and shape great pieces of writing not find voice in our considerations of literary journalism; and why should our students not know the value in becoming just such a person in the media landscape? But to reorient a course and excavate the editors and make visible their hands and eyes is quite a challenge nevertheless. It could also be further fodder for Brian Gabriel's study into the literary journalism canon around the world!

And then to turn to Boynton's ending remarks about the online environment for literary journalism. While the decisive turn from print journalism to online in North America and Western Europe can't be considered the normative trajectory for the rest of the world (print is growing in places in Africa, for instance), it's gratifying to see two things asserting themselves: one, that reading (and reading long) is on the ascendancy; and two, that newness was never a communicable disease that journalists managed to get the general population to catch—which means work of value continues to have value and can be found and enjoyed on and on and on. Whew!

So to end with where Boynton began—dangling before us the idea of a "supreme" non-fiction—could it be that, in the words he quoted from James Carey, to attain this what we need to do is continue to fashion ourselves into "tutors and shapers (writers *and* editors) of the craft, dedicated to elevating (what we do) to an exalted station"?

I like that as a goal but I also, like Boynton, aim to continue being a misfit, building rooms on the house of journalism that hunkers down on the territory of the academy.

---

*Anthea Garman is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa. She is co-leader (with Herman Wasserman) of the Mellon-funded research project into media and citizenship, and editor of the Rhodes Journalism Review, a magazine aimed at African journalists.*

---

