



TELLING TRUE STORIES

Navigating the challenges of
writing narrative non-fiction

Matthew Ricketson

AUTHOR OF *WRITING FEATURE STORIES*

A How-to with Ethics at Its Core

Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-Fiction

by Matthew Ricketson. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 2014. Paperback, 288 pp., \$39.99 (AUD), \$19.95 (US)

Reviewed by Jennifer E. Moore, University of Maine, United States

When my copy of *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-Fiction* arrived in the mail, I left it sitting on my kitchen table for a few days. A friend visiting noticed the book and was intrigued by the title. He asked what I thought about the book, and I explained that it had just arrived and I was assigned to review it. This friend happens to be a journalist who reports for a daily newspaper in a mid-sized, Midwestern town in the United States. I was hopeful I could give my friend a positive review. And, with few reservations, I would not discourage him from reading *Telling True Stories*.

A professor of journalism at the University of Canberra, Matthew Ricketson has written a book that draws on both his years of professional experience as a reporter and his scholarly and teaching endeavors. Ricketson explains that he aims to fill a gap in the current literature by combining a “how-to-write” guide with a deeper, scholarly reflection on the craft of narrative nonfiction. His work addresses issues about the process of writing, often through interpretations of well-known literary nonfiction works. Ricketson weaves in insights from both his own interviews with practitioners and from Robert S. Boynton’s *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*. Using Boynton’s work as a primary source, Ricketson interprets the interviews with many well-known literary journalists to analyze some well-known works to reveal some of the common problems associated with telling true stories in literary nonfiction.

Organized in twelve chapters with a “checklist” at the end for narrative nonfiction writers, Ricketson uses famous—or infamous—examples of book-length literary journalism to explore a wide range of ethical issues that practitioners face in research, interviewing, writing, and publishing. Becoming “friendly” but not “friends” with interview subjects; how to write about an event when you do not witness it firsthand; and understanding how to treat your audience respectfully and knowing how to best reach them are some of the topics Ricketson raises for his readers.

As someone who identifies first as a scholar of journalism and media history, I delve into the study of literary journalism from time to time. With that caveat, I found Ricketson’s work instructive and insightful in many ways. For example, in chapter 3, “Learning from the Journalistic Method,” Ricketson uses two groundbreaking works to compare and contrast approaches to true storytelling. Using Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and *The Final Days* by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Ricketson meanders his way through their storytelling methods to explore their contributions and to “peel back the mythology that has grown up around their

works” (41). Ricketson further explains that his interpretation considers Capote as a writer who is deeply influenced by his background in fiction writing while Woodward and Bernstein come to the craft from the profession of journalism. Spending a good deal of his critique on Woodward’s writing style—separate from his partnership from Bernstein—Ricketson cites several examples from Woodward’s literary writing choices to point out ethical lapses. For example, Ricketson does not advocate for Woodward’s “all knowing” storytelling style. In a list of ethical issues with Woodward’s writing, Ricketson says, “Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Woodward presents his findings through the prism of an omniscient narrative voice, which make me, at least, feel uncomfortable” (55).

On the theoretical side, Ricketson explores the contributions of other disciplines to the craft of literary storytelling. In chapter 6, “The Value of Thinking About What Is Fact and What Is Fiction *Before* Writing,” Ricketson reviews what aspiring literary nonfiction writers can glean from historians. Hayden White’s work is particularly useful, according to Ricketson, explaining, “it is relevant here because in history, as in narrative nonfiction, an attempt is being made to represent in words actual people and events” (118).

As someone interested in the evolution of media technologies and how they influence journalism, I was intrigued by a statement Ricketson made in his introduction about the “rewiring” we are experiencing through the “hyperconnectedness” of “new communication technologies.” I was hoping for a chapter dedicated to the exploration of how emerging media have fundamentally changed the practice of journalism and what that may mean for those who want to write literary nonfiction. While literary journalism and Twitter are not often mentioned in the same sentence, the evolution of social media and its influence on nonfiction storytelling would have been a useful addition.

Normally, I would not bother to comment on specific typos, but I was surprised to see a reference to “Conner, Tom” in the index (272). That error will jump out at anyone who knows the founders of the literary journalism field. I was also surprised to see some notable secondary sources about narrative nonfiction absent. For example, in Ricketson’s chapter titled “The Janet Malcolm Dilemma: Developing Trust with Principal Sources *and* Keeping Editorial Independence,” there is no reference or footnote to a related work about a libel suit against Malcolm, thoroughly explored in Kathy Robert Forde’s well-respected and award-winning book *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment*, which explores the historical tension between “objective” and “literary” journalism.

It seems that the implicit purpose of this book is an ethical exploration of literary journalism. This would be a stronger contribution if it had been positioned as a guide to the ethical practice of narrative nonfiction storytelling. Issues such as transparency, fairness, and harm along with ethical principles (for example, “The Golden Mean”) are peppered throughout the book. Using media ethics as an overt, unifying theme would have made this book a more compelling read. In addition, the “checklist” for literary nonfiction writers at the end would tie in more effortlessly with the rest of the book. This list is smartly intended for use alongside Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel’s

journalism ethical guidelines outlined in *The Elements of Journalism* (239).

In many ways, *Telling True Stories* reads like a “how to” for someone aspiring to write a book-length, nonfiction narrative. At its best, Ricketson’s book highlights ethical challenges when developing relationships with sources and crafting literary prose. This makes it a useful read in an advanced undergraduate or graduate media ethics and writing course. However, because Ricketson’s work is targeting book-length literary nonfiction writing, the best audience may be someone like my journalist friend. The book may provide the inspiration needed for a reporter holding on to a story idea that cannot be adequately told through the constraints of daily, deadline-driven journalism.
