

A Note From the Executive Editor...

by Bill Reynolds



Last Thursday, in my weekly Feature Writing Workshop class, I handed to students one sheet of paper with typing on both sides. It contained twenty-five factual bits of information about events that happened to me when I was eighteen years old. I knew all of these facts to be true, although I changed the names of the characters to 'Joe' and 'Rebecca.'

I asked my students to use between twelve and fifteen of those facts, no less, no more, in order to write a scene. The scene could be written however they wanted—from Joe's point of view, or Rebecca's, or perhaps the omniscient narrator's.

They consumed about twenty minutes of class before I finally called, "Time's up!" I insisted they read aloud their works in their best broadcast quality voices. Many of the baker's dozen in attendance chose to stick safely to the script, inferring only what logically could be inferred from the facts. Their prose was generally acceptable, but rarely did it come alive. A few, however, took liberties, and this is where things got interesting, because some of those liberties looked not only plausible but also legitimate. They dug inside Rebecca's head and tried to think the way she was thinking. Indeed, some statements went beyond basic inference, yet did not cross a border to become factually incorrect.

For instance, when Joe arrived in Banff, Alberta, he stayed at Rebecca's place because he had nowhere else to go. Rebecca already had a job, but Joe didn't. No job, no accommodation, and a steadily dwindling cash supply. He imposed on Rebecca for nine days before finally landing a summer job. Some students interpreted the fact that Rebecca yelled at Joe once to mean Rebecca frequently must have been angry with her shiftless boyfriend. One student, however, modulated Rebecca's scorn. He wrote from the point of view of a frustrated girlfriend who loved Joe but resorted to barking at him to incite him to find paid work. This is not only closer to the correct psychological take, but hints at the gray nature of reality. Rebecca is angry not in cartoon-like fashion but in a tempered way.

I mention this exercise because, for me at least, it gets the writer, the teacher, and the scholar of literary journalism a bit closer to the crux of a persistent problem: Where exactly is that truth boundary, as Norman Sims characterizes it? Does it move? Is it a formidable looking *Ligne Maginot* that is surprisingly easy to circumvent? Is it purely situational? When is it okay to cross? Never? Sometimes, depending on the circumstances? The truth boundary, alas, may well be literary journalism's *bête noire*.

In this, the second issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*, we find five pieces of scholarship and one excerpt from a new piece of literary journalism, all of which in one way or another emphatically do not avoid this search for what seems to present itself in a color spectrum consisting only of grays.

In our excerpt from Ian Brown's *The Boy in the Moon*, the author jabs at, teases out, and challenges his own reality barrier—in almost an investigative phenomenological analysis, à la Annie Dillard's prismatic look at existence, *For the Time Being*—with respect to Walker, his severely handicapped son. Walker cannot communicate in any conventional way, which forces Brown to search for flickers of reality, to glimpse the truth of what Walker might actually be thinking.

Miles Maguire discusses the inadequacies of the “village reporting” of war journalist Richard Critchfield, an ambitious level of immersion that seemed to elevate Tom Wolfe's saturation reporting to another plane of reality. Even living among the Vietnamese, for example, learning their dialects and customs, to see things as they see them, was not without its own set of tricky truth-tests for Critchfield.

In Aryn Bartley's piece about James Agee and shame, we find Agee of course grappling with the notion of exploitation in his written and Walker Evans's photographic objectification of subjects, the shame of doing so, and allowing oneself to become the objectified in order to stanch the flow of guilt involved in this purportedly ameliorating truth-telling process.

In Berkley Hudson's and Rebecca Townsend's study of *Harper's* magazine under the editorship of Willie Morris, we find that the search for truth through the writing of daring prose can result in a conflict so serious that it ultimately prohibits the work from being accomplished, despite its pursuit of excellence in truth-telling.

Cheryl Gooch recalibrates the factual truth of Joel Chandler Harris's apparent acquiescence to a racist journalistic framework by balancing it with the writer and editorialist's later views on how education could emancipate black Americans in his lifetime.

And Josh Roiland takes on the notoriously prolix writing of David Foster Wallace, arguing that for Wallace it was one hurdle to write truthfully in his fiction, but a much higher leap when writing his literary journalism for magazines such as *Harper's* and *Premiere*. That is because Wallace, like everyone else, needed to subscribe to Nietzsche's concept of oblivion, shutting out the more unpleasant aspects of consciousness in exchange for happiness. But to do so Wallace found that he could not do justice to his own literary journalism.

As for the students of mine who produced some of the more outrageous versions of an eighteen-year-old's reality, they admitted to enjoying the act of tarting up facts—they found it *très amusant*, in fact—but agreed with me that a quick follow-up interview would most likely clear away any gremlins that crossed the truth border.

And if the follow-up interview didn't catch them, the fact-checker would.