

Gabriel García Márquez, 1984. Courtesy Wikimedia Creative Commons, F3rn4nd0, edited by Mangostar.

Gabriel García Márquez's Three Nonfiction Books: A Trilogy on Fear and Resilience

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Works Discussed:

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor. New York: Vintage, 1989. Paperback, 128 pp., USD\$13.95

Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littín. New York: NYRB Classics, 2010. Paperback, 160 pp., USD\$14

News of a Kidnapping. New York: Vintage, 2008. Paperback, 304 pp., USD\$15.95

The novelist and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014) is one of the most widely read and admired authors of the twentieth century. His novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, written in 1967 when he was thirty-nine years old, is the most translated work of fiction in the Spanish language. What few people outside of Latin America know is how much his style, his stories, and even his invention of his “magical realism” are based on his career and perennial vocation as a journalist.

Unlike other world-famous fiction writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, Orhan Pamuk, or García Márquez's old friend and colleague Mario Vargas Llosa, who considered their reporter days as a step in their development as novelists, García Márquez never abandoned reportage as a form nor nonfiction as a fertile ground for his ambitious creations. He never ceased to create and dream of new magazines; and the foundation that carries his message and bears his name, the Gabriel García Márquez New Ibero-American Journalism Foundation (FNPI),¹ which he founded in 1994 and led until his death, is a child of love and labor dedicated to the development of journalism in his language.

In 2012, two years before his death, when the FNPI published an important anthology of his literary journalism, the first words, taken from a radio interview, are the master storyteller's self-definition: “First and foremost, I am a journalist. I have been a journalist throughout my life. My books are books by a journalist, even if not many realize this. But these books have a mass of investigation, fact-checking and historic rigor, of faithfulness to the facts, which make them fictionalized or fantasized reportage. The method of research and management of data are those of a journalist.”²

The vast body of García Márquez's journalism is collected in four chronologically organized volumes—*Textos costeños (Caribbean Texts)*; *Entre cachacos (In Bogotá)*; *De Europa y América (Between Europe and the Americas)*; and *Por la libre (Free Roads)* or *Caribbean Texts (Textos costeños)*; *In Bogotá (Entre cachacos)*; *Between Europe and the Americas (De Europa y América)*; and *Free Roads (Por la libre)*³—that follow his life and career moves. However, he published only three narrative nonfiction books in his lifetime: *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (Relato de un naufragio)*, a series originally published in the daily *El Espectador* in 1955 and collected as a book in Barcelona in 1970⁴; *Clandestine in Chile (La Aventura de Miguel Littín clandestino en Chile)*, published in 1986⁵; and *News of a Kidnapping (Noticia de un secuestro)*, published in 1996,⁶ fourteen years after García Márquez had been awarded the Nobel Prize.

To return to reporting, interviewing, and writing nonfiction was a strange choice for the famous novelist. By the 1990s, García Márquez was so famous and so sought after that he could no longer walk freely the streets of Bogotá or Medellín, watch people go their own way without being noticed, or enter any building without becoming the center of attention. These were the conditions under which he wrote *News of a Kidnapping*, which he considered a debt he owed to the reporter he had been when he didn't have enough time to think, read, interview, write, and rewrite.

All three books deal with one character or a handful of characters who, almost from start to finish, are on the brink of being killed and need to gather courage, energy, attention, and resourcefulness they did not know they had. Each of these books is a focused exercise in exploring the immersion of a victim in the stages of danger, desperation, and release. And all are told from the exclusive viewpoint of that character “on the run.”

In the late eighties, I had the experience of interviewing a “character” from one of these books: Grazia Francescato was an Italian filmmaker who posed as the director of a fake documentary in *Clandestine in Chile*. She later became an environmental activist. When I interviewed her, Francescato gave me a glimpse of what it meant and how it felt to be interviewed by García Márquez for one of his nonfiction books: The experience was grueling. He wanted to know absolutely every detail she could remember, every garment Miguel Littín, the main character, and everybody else was wearing, every word that was spoken, and what she felt at every moment.

With the mountain of details, forms, colors, words, and tiny anecdotes, he wrote a kind of nonfiction book that was very unusual at that time in Latin America. The method, the style, and the narrative voice of *Clandestine in Chile* would end up being the same as those he had employed in the surprising success of his first journalistic book.

The Voice of a Novelist for the Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor

In 1955, as García Márquez tells in his memoir, he was commissioned by his editor at *El Espectador* to comply with an almost impossible task: to tell the story of a young Navy officer who had fallen from the brand new frigate his crew was bringing from Mobile, Alabama, to the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The other sailors who had fallen overboard drowned quickly but Lt. Luis Alejandro Velasco managed

to survive alone on a raft with no food and almost no water for ten days, until he reached a beach and was rescued. He had already given dozens of interviews for newspapers, radio, and the new medium of television. His story was, as *El Espectador* owner and editor Guillermo Cano said, “rotten meat.”⁷ But García Márquez saw Velasco's story as the material for a series, with a new chapter published every day in the morning paper. The story of the sailor would be told in the first-person voice, as in an adventure novel.

And Velasco became the interviewee that every narrative journalist dreams of finding: “He turned out to reveal himself as an intelligent man, with an unforgettable sensitivity, politeness and sense of humor.” The author then adds: “It was like strolling along a garden full of flowers with the supreme freedom to pick the ones I preferred.”⁸

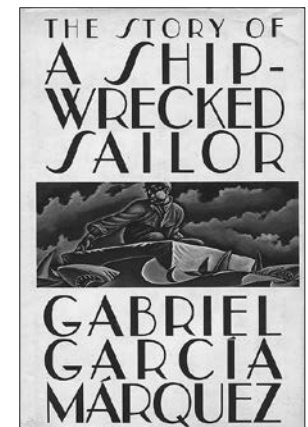
The two men met every afternoon: Velasco told his story and García Márquez taught him how to do it. “The first days were difficult because he wanted to tell everything at the same time. But he soon learned through the order and scope of my questions and due to his own natural instinct as a storyteller and his congenial ease to understand the craft.”⁹

It seems as if García Márquez transformed the shipwrecked sailor into a journalist of his own story, a partner and ally in the joint task. They had agreed to work on fourteen chapters but due to the series' success (*El Espectador* sold more copies the days the serial was included), Cano told his reporter to extend it to fifty. Finally, they settled for twenty.

There is much to praise in the lean masterpiece: the way in which the secondary characters are presented (García Márquez wanted his narrator to focus his Mobile recollections on the sailors who later died in the sea), the trauma of suffering from acute thirst while surrounded by water, the drop of blood that falls in the sea and brings a school of sharks, the lonely starry nights. There are traces of the avid reader who had marked his copies of *Moby-Dick* or *Robinson Crusoe*. One of my favorite moments is the night in which he spotted the horizon with “a hard, rebellious patience” dreaming of approaching airplanes.¹⁰

Suddenly the sky became red and I continued to scrutinize the horizon. It later became dark violet and I kept on looking. At one side of the raft, like a yellow diamond, the sky turned the color of wine and the first star appeared. It was like a signal. Soon after that, the night, tense and tight, fell over the sea.¹¹

The *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* definitely reads much more like the language and metaphors of one of García Márquez's novels than anything the lieutenant could have said. It is an interpretation of what the man saw and felt, but in a language completely alien to what he would have actually said. The book's publication destroyed Velasco's career and sent García Márquez into an exile that turned out to be permanent. Aiming to write what happened with grit and



precision, García Márquez's series had revealed the real cause of the crisis. There was no terrible storm the day the men fell overboard; rather, the Navy destroyer *Caldas* carried so much contraband from the United States that a simple wind caused the tragedy. This story of the shipwrecked sailor closes what García Márquez had originally planned as the first volume of his memoirs but turned out to be the only one he wrote.

Fifteen years after the original series was published, a Barcelona editor¹² convinced García Márquez to turn the series into a book. It is still one of his most widely read volumes. Long after the corruption and contraband case became an issue only for historians, and in the face of other more recent shipwrecks with many more victims and survivors who spent much more time lost at sea, García Márquez's reportage is still widely read at schools all over Latin America and admired by the public at large for its literary merits. It is still one of the best books dealing with the human theme of one man's combat with the elements, comparable for Spanish language readers to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

From Sharks to Pinochet's Police

Among the group of left-wing intellectuals from all over Latin America that García Márquez found in Mexico City after he returned from Europe in the 1980s, the Chilean filmmaker Miguel Littín had a mad, almost suicidal plan: Ten years after the beginning of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, Littín wanted to return to his native land to film the dire conditions of the poor, the oppressed, and the revolutionary activists surviving in the shadows of a bloody regime. When Littín came back, García Márquez interviewed him almost nonstop for a week, amassing eighteen hours of tape (unlike in 1955, this time García Márquez recorded his "victim's" story).

With a pointed context for the human rights and social situation in Chile, and interviews with other members of the team—such as Grazia Francescato—the author published *Clandestine in Chile*, a first-person narrative that reads much like the story of the shipwrecked sailor: The voice of Miguel Littín tells his adventure from start to finish. From the moment he enters his home country, from which he had been banned since he left after the coup and where he would probably be tortured and "disappeared" were he discovered, every page is full of fear, nervousness, resilience, and the will to accomplish his mission and survive.

Like Velasco, Littín's senses are constantly alert lest he miss the sign that can save his life. The details are a vital narrative tool: They lead the reader to feel the constant tension and danger the character is in. And as was true of his sailor, García Márquez found in Littín a genial and memorable interviewee.



But it is a flawed book, because it tries to copy the success of another one. Even the ever-admiring biographer Gerald Martin finds *Clandestine in Chile* hastily written and showing signs of authorial exhaustion.¹³

García Márquez had been looking for some time for an interviewee with a story as gripping as that of the shipwrecked sailor, who could tell it as vividly and with as many details. And a couple of ideas almost became such a book: In his memoir *Vivir para contarla* (*Living to Tell the Tale*), the writer says that he and his editor had considered the first-person narrative of the most famous cyclist of his time, Ramón Hoyos; and the story of an engineer and treasure hunter who was sure he could find the gold hidden by the liberator of half of South America, Simón Bolívar, under the city of Bogotá.¹⁴

Bolívar, who haunted the author for decades, finally became the subject of his historic novel, *The General in His Labyrinth*. But the novel did not include the story of his mad treasure hunter, who could only work as nonfiction, or so says García Márquez in his recollection of events. At that time, even if they tried, "it was not possible to find a story such as [the sailor's], because it was not one that can be invented on paper. Life invents them, usually the hard way."¹⁵ But in 1985, thirty years later, he finally found his man.

Clandestine in Chile reads like a political thriller, not as a classic tale of human resilience like the story of the shipwrecked sailor but rather as a battle of wits with the forces of dictatorship, as in a John le Carré novel. García Márquez felt vindicated and proud when Pinochet's dictatorship ordered a heap of his books burned at the port of Valparaíso when they arrived in the country. He had composed a dangerous book.

Littín was a fine character for such a thriller. Since he was banned from Chile and faced prison (at least) if he returned, Littín had to invent a name, another nationality, a disguise, an accent, a beard, and a rich businessman's gait to enter his country. So he posed as a Uruguayan producer of a documentary on Chilean classical architecture and went undetected by the secret police. He traveled along the long, narrow territory and on various occasions he faced imminent danger: He entered the presidential palace and met with incognito guerilla leaders. At an especially dramatic moment, in a street full of policemen, he spotted his mother-in-law: She did not recognize him.

In the introduction to the book, García Márquez explains that he preferred to "tell the story in the first person, just like Littín told it to me, trying to preserve the personal, sometimes confidential, tone, without easy dramatizations or historical pretentiousness. The style of the final text is mine, of course, because the voice of a writer is not interchangeable However, I have tried to keep the Chilean way of speaking and respect at all times the ideas of the narrator, which are not always the same as my own."¹⁶

But, unlike the sailor, Littín is in his own merit a storyteller. He produced fiction films, such as the acclaimed social neorealist movie, *El chacal de Nahueltoro*, about a brutalized laborer condemned and executed for a murder, and *Alsino y el cóndor*, during his stay in Nicaragua after he fled Chile. He is also the author of two novels. I read one of them, *El viajero de las cuatro estaciones* (*The Traveler of Four Seasons*). It is verbose and prolific in adjective, and the voice sounds nothing like that of the char-

acter that bears his name in García Márquez's book. In fact, the Littín of *Clandestine in Chile* speaks with the typical combination of poetic prose and economy of means that one recognizes immediately as that of García Márquez.

In the Grip of Pablo Escobar

In 1996, a decade after *Clandestine in Chile*, García Márquez decided there was something else he needed to write as nonfiction: the true story of the kidnappings by the notorious Pablo Escobar.

David Brindlay summarized the plot in a review published shortly after the book's release in English: "On a secluded ranch dotted with African wildlife, a Colombian drug lord orchestrates the abduction of 10 leading journalists and political figures. The drug lord, Pablo Escobar, declares that he will release these hostages only if he is tried for narcotics crimes in his native land and not extradited to the United States for trial. 'Better a grave in Colombia,' he avows, 'than a jail in the United States.' The Colombian government at first refuses to bend. After two of the prisoners are murdered, though, the government bars Escobar's extradition, and the remaining hostages are released."¹⁷

This time it was not one but a handful of desperate characters in the hands of drug cartel hit men. The kidnapped ones who survived told the story to the most famous novelist of his time turned into a reporter once again. They had spent months looking, listening, smelling, intensely, remembering all they could in order to be able to react to the constant and imminent danger they to which they were subjected. Instead of the sharks of the Caribbean or Pinochet's secret police, it was Escobar's henchmen.

Ten citizens, several of them prominent journalists, politicians, and intellectuals, were kidnapped in 1990. Two were killed, and most of the others, especially Maruja Pachón, Beatriz Villamizar, and Francisco Santos, told García Márquez their experiences, together with those of their relatives and the television journalist Diana Turbay, who was killed. In his use of the third-person voice to tell the story from the viewpoint of these characters, García Márquez uses a style akin to what John Hersey accomplished in *Hiroshima*.

Ángel Díaz Arenas argues that, since the characters are many and the place and time of the events keep changing (they were kidnapped separately and were moved from one safe house to another during their captivity), the structure of this book is far more complex than the previous ones.¹⁸ But I believe it is the same style of approach to a story of historical importance: through the experience and the memory of one or a few endangered victims. There is no debate as to which is the viewpoint the readers are invited to identify with. None of the hostages is the main leader or antagonist of the big historic battle, and all go through serious physical and psychological stress.

This nonfiction story starts with the kidnapping of Maruja Pachón and Beatriz Villamizar. They are the main voices in the narrative, and the reader follows their road of despair and hope and the formidable fight of Maruja's husband and Beatriz's brother Alberto Villamizar to secure their release, which led Villamizar to confront both Pablo Escobar and the president.

But even if the precision and poetic metaphors in García Márquez's prose show the parallels between these, his three nonfiction books, and his revered novels, as the veteran reporter he always described himself to be, he refrained from including scenes and dialogue for which he had no evidence. There is a precise moment in *News of a Kidnapping* that shows this to great dramatic effect.

At the end of chapter five, Beatriz and Maruja are told that their companion in captivity, Marina Montoya, would be released. They suspected the outcome could be tragically different. Escobar needed a strong punch on the table because his negotiations with the state not to be extradited to the United States were leading nowhere and Marina had little negotiation value. She was desperate, and she had been in captivity for more than a year. When she tried to take a pill her friends offered, she could not find her own mouth. From Maruja and Beatriz's testimony, García Márquez tells the last moments they saw her:

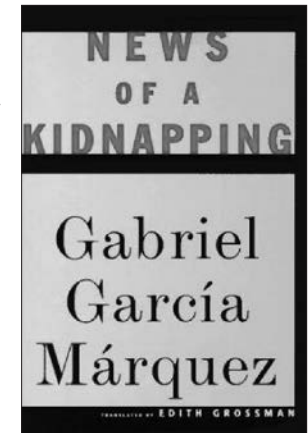
Marina turned to the guards without a tear. They turned the hood around, with the openings for the eyes and mouth at the back of her head so she could not see anything. The Monk [one of the guards] took both her hands and led her out of the house, walking backward. Marina followed with unfaltering steps. The other guard locked the door from the outside.

Maruja and Beatriz stood motionless in front of the closed door, not knowing how to take up their lives again, until they heard the engines in the garage and then the sound fading away in the distance. Only then did they realize the television and radio had been taken away to keep them from knowing how the night would end.¹⁹

These are the last words of chapter five. And these are the first of chapter six: "At dawn the next day, Thursday, January 24, the body of Marina Montoya was found in an empty lot north of Bogotá. Almost sitting upright in grass still damp from an early rain, she was leaning against the barbed-wire fence with her arms extended."²⁰

If this were fiction, in between these scenes, of course, García Márquez the novelist would have told his readers the dramatic moment of her murder: how they chose the place, what she said, what they did. But there are no witnesses to tell the reporter, no evidence. Thus, in these choices, García Márquez sticks to his commitment to tell what he knows and nothing more, and readers are reminded they are in front of true events, and the hole in the story between the last moment the victim was seen by her friends and the moment her body was found is like a shouting silence.

Why did García Márquez choose these subjects and people for his journalistic books? He knew and befriended many powerful men. He was close to both Fidel Castro and Bill Clinton, and he was a witness and protagonist of many key events in history. Unlike the New Journalism masters of his own generation (Truman Capote,



Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe), he did not write his most ambitious nonfiction books about the powerful and the famous he so well knew.

Instead, García Márquez decided that the only three nonfiction books he approved to be published as such, are those which span four decades, the entire length of his literary career, and would follow, respectively, a few days or months in the lives of the sailor Alejandro Velasco; the filmmaker Miguel Littín; and a group of Colombian politicians, journalists, and their aides, in their fight for survival.

I believe these people were all, in their own ways, his eyes and ears and beating heart in the scenes they lived. They were excellent memoirists and narrators of their own adventures, but it was their special circumstances (the fear, trembling, and almost supernatural will to survive) that expanded their powers of observation and allowed the creator of magic realism to craft memorable true stories based on their experiences.

The study of these not widely known aspects of García Márquez's work opens various roads to scholarly enquiry. One is the comparison and cross-pollination of the fiction and nonfiction works of writers who published in both genres, in Spanish, English, and other languages. An excellent example of this is Pablo Calvi's PhD dissertation on Latin American *crónica* and American New Journalism.²¹

Another topic of inquiry could be the roots, styles, and legacy of *testimonio*, a fertile genre used in Latin American literary journalism in the 1960s and 1970s by authors such as Elena Poniatowska,²² Miguel Barnet,²³ and Roque Dalton.²⁴ The first two books by García Márquez analyzed here certainly adhere to this genre, which closely resembles the theater monologue. They use the first-person narrative of their main character, or a succession of first-person anecdotes or recollections similar to the uses of oral history, in a vein and style similar to the now recognized style of Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, none of whose works these Latin American authors had read.

A third field of interest could be linked to the journalistic production of García Márquez himself: Why did he refrain from writing nonfiction about the most obvious characters—the real-life dictators and revolutionary leaders of his day that he knew better than any other reporter—choosing instead an indirect approach to political tragedies through secondary characters. A comparative study could place this strategy next to that of Polish literary journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, with whose books García Márquez once said his own had much in common.²⁵ Kapuściński also wrote about great leaders through the eyes and stories of their servants, followers, or victims, and also uses their first-person narratives in books such as *The Emperor and Shah of Shahs*.²⁶

Notes

¹ FNPI. Gabriel García Márquez New Ibero-American Journalism Foundation (FNPI). Accessed November 8, 2018. <http://fnpi.org/es/node/4459>.

² García Márquez, as quoted in FNPI, *Gabo Periodista*, vi. These words are the book's first, and are the master storyteller's self-definition, taken from an interview by Darío Arizmendi on Caracol Radio, Bogotá, broadcast on May 30–31, 1991 (translation mine).

³ Title translations mine.

⁴ García Márquez, *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (Relato de un naufragio)*.

⁵ García Márquez, *Clandestine in Chile (La aventura de Miguel Littín, clandestine en Chile)*.

⁶ García Márquez, *News of a Kidnapping (Noticia de un secuestro)*.

⁷ García Márquez, *Vivir para contarla (Living to Tell the Tale)*, 651–75 (translation mine).

⁸ García Márquez.

⁹ García Márquez.

¹⁰ García Márquez.

¹¹ García Márquez.

¹² Beatriz de Moura (editor and co-owner of the Tusquets publishing house), in discussion with author, 2006. She said (as she had written before) that at the beginning García Márquez was reluctant to publish his series as a book. He thought the proposal was due to the fact that he was a famous novelist as well. *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* later sold more than ten million copies.

¹³ Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, 526.

¹⁴ García Márquez, *Vivir para contarla*.

¹⁵ García Márquez.

¹⁶ García Márquez, *La Aventura de Miguel Littín clandestino en Chile [Clandestine in Chile]*, 9 (translation mine).

¹⁷ Brindley, Review of *News of a Kidnapping*, 104.

¹⁸ Díaz Arenas: *Reflexiones en torno a Noticia de un secuestro* (Reflections on *News of a Kidnapping*).

¹⁹ García Márquez, 125.

²⁰ García Márquez, 126.

²¹ Calvi, "The Parrot and the Cannon."

²² Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco*.

²³ Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*.

²⁴ Dalton, *Miguel Mármol*.

²⁵ García Márquez said this when he presented Kapuściński at a FNPI workshop in Mexico City in March 2001. I tell this story in my book *Periodismo narrativo*.

²⁶ Kapuściński, *The Emperor*; Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*.

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A Master Class in Nonfiction Writing

Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process

by John McPhee. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. Graphics. Hardcover, 192 pp., USD\$25.

Reviewed by Peggy Dillon, Salem State University, United States

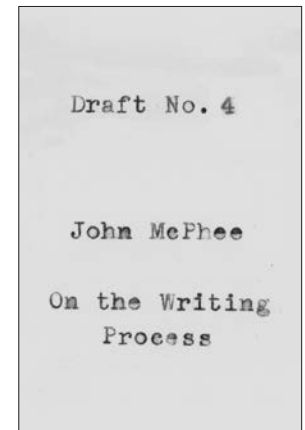
Nonfiction writer John McPhee has authored thirty-two published books and won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for *Annals of the Former World*. He started his journalism career in 1957 at *Time* magazine, has been a staff writer at the *New Yorker* since 1965, and has taught his creative nonfiction course to some 500 Princeton University students since 1975. *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process* distills the essence of his writer's craft into a pithy 192 pages.

The book contains a wellspring of advice on how to be a better reporter, writer, and note-taker. It also intersperses excerpts from McPhee's six-decade-long body of work on subjects as disparate as oranges, geology, tennis, and canoes. Adding color are anecdotes about his reporting process that range from the prosaic (scribbling notes in the passenger seat of a pickup truck) to the prominent (interviewing the actor Richard Burton on a British movie set).

The book's title is based on one of eight *New Yorker* essays on the writing process that comprise the book, together with "Progression," "Structure," "Editor & Publisher," "Elicitation," "Frame of Reference," "Checkpoints," and "Omission." *Draft No. 4* refers to his favorite stage in the writing process: when he makes small but satisfying final adjustments to pieces.

Among the book's many strengths is its encouraging tone. For aspiring writers, McPhee says, early interests and experiences will help inform their decisions later as writers. He realized at one point that the majority of the subjects he had written about were those he'd been interested in prior to college. His growing up, summer-time canoe trips and ecology classes at summer camp provided scaffolding for his later books about Alaska's Brooks Range and running the rapids through the Grand Canyon. During his early years, he admits, he had "no idea that I was building the shells of future pieces of writing" (7).

McPhee is refreshingly self-effacing. He admits to being "shy to the point of dread" (12), wrestling with writer's block, and being fretful, neurotic, and unconfident when working with *New Yorker* editor William Shawn on the 1965 article "A Sense of Where You Are," a profile of Princeton basketball player Bill Bradley that later became McPhee's first book. Even now, he's a little wobbly when starting a new



project. “It doesn’t matter that something you’ve done before worked out well,” he writes. “Your last piece is never going to write your next one for you” (19).

Draft No. 4 offers many useful nuggets of advice: Write a lead first, “before you go at the big pile of raw material and sort it into a structure” (49). Create a story structure that is “simple, straightforward, invisible” (58). Take care in crafting a title, “an integral part of a piece of writing” (73). Young writers should experiment to find out what kind of writers they are: “It is so easy to misjudge yourself and get stuck in the wrong genre. You avoid that, early on, by writing in every genre” (79). When selecting what to include or exclude in an article, “If something interests you, it goes in—if not, it stays out” (180). He has found a consistent ratio of four to one in the time it takes to write a first draft compared to combined subsequent drafts, noting that “the essence of the [writing] process is revision” (160). Take notes constantly—he has done so while hiking up and down trails—and obviously: “From the start, make clear what you are doing and who will publish what you write. Display your notebook as if it were a fishing license” (92). About interviewing and getting information: “I have no technique for asking questions. I just stay there and fade away as I watch people do what they do” (99). Most importantly, *never* make things up: “Is it wrong to alter a fact in order to improve the rhythm of your prose? I know so, and so do you. If you do that, you are by definition not writing nonfiction” (104).

McPhee embraces an organic approach to coming up with topics. “Ideas are where you find them,” he writes, and “new pieces can shoot up from other pieces, pursuing connections that run through the ground like rhizomes” (11). Once a writer has an idea for a project: “You begin with a subject, gather material, and work your way to structure from there. You pile up volumes of notes and then figure out what you are going to do with them, not the other way around” (4). When selecting information for his articles, he decides which details are collectively essential: “I include what interests me and exclude what doesn’t interest me. That may be a crude tool but it’s the only one I have” (56–57).

To say that McPhee takes full-immersion reporting seriously is an understatement. For his book *The Pine Barrens*, he spent eight months interviewing forest rangers, botanists, and other subjects, reading books and scientific papers, and camping on site. To organize the prodigious information he amasses, he painstakingly structures his work. While a chronological format usually prevails, sometimes a thematic approach wins out. His basic rule for structures is that “they should not be imposed upon the material. They should arise from within it” (34).

The section on structure—which at forty-five pages forms almost a quarter of the book—is informative but also gets bogged down in detail. He describes his early methods of using three-by-five-inch cards containing key words, typing out handwritten notes, transcribing interviews from microcassettes, and cutting a typed copy of his draft into slivers that he organized and worked on one at a time. Since 1984, he has used custom-written computer programs that help sort and text-edit his work. But the section’s charts depicting organizational structures, ranging from strings of numerals to arrows on circles, sometimes read like graphic organizers run amok.

Overall, though, *Draft No. 4* is an excellent guide for writers at all levels of their career, from tentative college students to seasoned journalists.

A Life of Not Being Noticed

The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit
by Michael Finkel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. Paperback/Hardcover, 203 pp., USD\$25.95.

Reviewed by Mark Marchand, State University of New York, Albany, United States

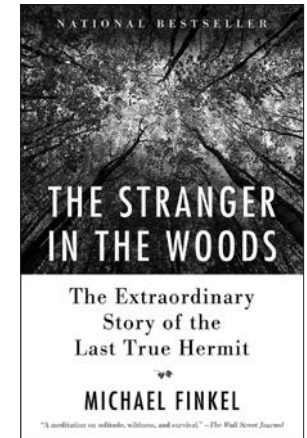
The concept of being alone, intentionally separated from the rest of the noisy, distracting world to either find one’s self or to simply experience solitude, has for centuries captured the imagination of poets, writers, and the general public. How wonderful it might be, some say, to sever our connections to our crazy world and reflect upon our lives—in silence.

It’s not a desire forced upon us by our overly connected digital world. Thoreau wrote of his mid-1800s experience at Walden Pond, “I feel it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (1939, 141).

Some of our most noted explorers in the early twentieth century weren’t content to rest on the adoration of a world dazzled by their discoveries. Famed North Pole and Antarctic explorer Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd, for example, returned to Antarctica in 1936 to spend four harrowing months living by himself in a tiny shack. In his popular 1938 book, *Alone*, he recounted, “Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence—a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps” (85).

These and other situations described in literature have dealt mostly with temporary expeditions into seclusion. What if someone in our modern times chose to live *all* or most of life in isolation, and told us the story so creatively that we wanted to meet that person and ask “Why?” Author Michael Finkel—who has previously given us *Alpine Circus* and *True Story, Murder Memoir and Mea Culpa* (made into a movie in 2015, and drawing in part on his own dismissal in 2002 from the *New York Times* for submitting a composite character and telling his editors it was a real individual)—has provided a detailed look at such a person, his experience, and a glimpse into why he did it.

In the *Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*, Finkel blends the journalist’s eye with the storyteller’s craft to bring us inside the true story of Christopher Knight. This quiet young adult abandoned a life with his family at age twenty to live by himself in the woods of Maine for twenty-seven years.



It's a tale that would challenge even the most inventive of fiction writers, but Finkel manages to immerse himself into Knight's mind and the world around him to meticulously gather the elements of an almost unbelievable story. This is no time-worn account of the soldier who emerges from the woods after months of hiding, blinking in bright sunlight only to discover his country has already lost the war. Indeed, Knight's story—largely due to the way Finkel tells it—leaves the reader wondering why many have never heard about Knight's feat at a time in history when almost nothing and no one escapes notice.

As a veteran journalist, Finkel might have been tempted to build a more traditional chronological narrative. He might have focused on Knight's early life, building up to his shocking decision to flee into the woods near Albion, Maine, and then telling the hermit's story of life in isolation. Finkel does give us a brief glimpse of Knight's routine in the first chapter, taking us along on one of his secretive, regular treks from his hidden camp—"He bounds from rock to rock without a footprint left behind"—to nearby homes to forage for food (3).

"It [the area where Knight's camp sits] has a name, Little Pond, often called Little North Pond, though the hermit doesn't know it," Finkel writes. "He's stripped the world to his essentials, and proper names are not essential. He knows the season, intimately, its every gradation" (4).

"He knows the moon, a sliver less than half tonight, waning. Typically, he'd await the new moon—darker is better—but his hunger had become critical. He knows the hour and minute. He's wearing an old windup watch to ensure that he budgets enough time to return before daybreak. He doesn't know, at least not without calculating, the year or the decade" (4).

After telling us about the discovery of a "smorgasbord" (6) at a summer camp closed for the season, Finkel diverts from the journalist's narrative to take us into the decades-long law enforcement search for what many assumed to be some sort of loner repeatedly breaking and entering for food and supplies. It's spring 2013 as the story accelerates, and Sergeant Terry Hughes is finally successful, snaring Knight in the middle of the night after sensors planted in a camp reveal that the burglar is active. It is here that the complex, serpentine life of the forty-seven-year-old hermit slowly reveals itself during interviews with police and, eventually, Finkel. After a pre-dawn interrogation during which officers conclude Knight is who he says he is, courtesy of a 1984 high school yearbook, Knight slowly begins to divulge more of his story. "It's not long before dawn now; the darkness has crested," Finkel writes. Another officer, Diane Vance, knows Knight "will soon be swallowed by the legal system, and perhaps never speak freely again. She'd like an explanation—why leave the rest of the world behind?—but Knight says he can't give her a definitive reason" (21).

The officers learn that Knight feels he never got sick because he didn't have any contact with other humans, and he only encountered one person, a hiker strolling through the woods. Knight had said "Hi" (22).

"Other than that single syllable, he insists, he had not spoken with or touched another human being, until this evening, for twenty-seven years," Finkel concludes (22).

Months after the modern hermit's arrest and incarceration, Finkel sets out to find the hermit's camp. It's a struggle, due to Knight's painstaking efforts to conceal his home from nearby waterways, paths . . . and civilization. After finally locating the well-lived-in camp on the forest floor, Finkel explores the site and learns how Knight handled daily chores, such as going to the bathroom, washing clothes, and collecting drinking water from rain. Finkel sets up his own tent and spends the night, seeking to experience what his subject felt as the only real clock slid beneath the horizon.

"Night fell fast," Finkel writes. "Frogs cleared their throats; cicadas whirred like table saws. A woodpecker hammered for grubs. At last came the call of the loons, the theme song of the North Woods, peeling like a laugh or cry, depending on your mood. A car crunched over a dirt road, a dog barked. For a while people could be heard talking, though their words were too muffled to make out" (65).

It is in describing this nightfall in Knight's former home that Finkel begins to excel in drawing his reader into the hermit's world. He finally falls asleep that first night. When he awakens, he discovers one of the reasons Knight lived in the woods. "A volley of birdcalls greeted the morning," he reports. "I unzipped my tent. There was mist in the treetops; spider webs shone cat's cradle in the dew. Leaves dropped lazily. Autumn was coming, and the air smelled like sap. I turned on my phone and realized I'd rested for twelve hours, my longest sleep in years" (66).

Throughout the rest of the book, Finkel employs a similarly keen observer's eye, melded with expressive prose to tell Knight's story. As the tale draws to a close and as Knight battles to adapt to a world with cell phones and the internet, Finkel struggles to understand why someone might decide to abandon society and live alone. In addition to interviewing Knight, he talks with a number of academic and medical experts on the topic. They help shed some light, but in the end Knight's reasoning remains mostly elusive.

Finkel muses over what would have happened if Officer Hughes hadn't been so dedicated, and Knight had never been caught and lived his entire life in the woods, eventually dying and allowing the forest to reclaim him and his campsite. "It's the ending, I believe, that Knight planned. He wasn't going to leave behind a single recorded thought, not a photo, not an idea. No person would know of his experience. Nothing would ever be written about him. He would simply vanish, and no one on this teeming planet would notice. His end wouldn't create so much as a ripple on North Pond. It would have been an existence, a life, of utter perfection" (190–91).

Thanks to Finkel's book, we do know something about Knight's life.

Stripping Away the Women's Angle

The Woman War Correspondent, the U.S. Military, and the Press 1846–1947
by Carolyn M. Edy. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. Notes. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 175 pages, USD\$80.

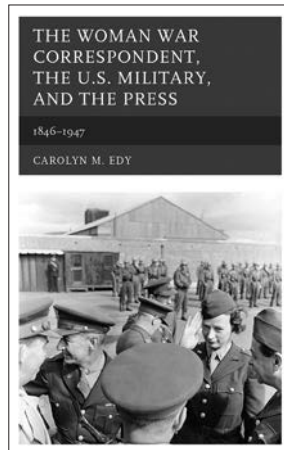
Reviewed by Brian Gabriel, Concordia University, Canada

Carolyn Edy's thoroughly researched press history, *The Woman War Correspondent, The U.S. Military, and the Press*, reminds readers that covering America's wars was never just a man's game. Tracing the work female journalists did in the nineteenth century through World War II, Edy shows how they fought gender battles on three major fronts: the military who didn't want them there, a profession that demanded they act like men, and the wartime United States that expected them to act like women. Still, these journalists persevered, overcoming military resistance while balancing social norms expected of them and their professional ambitions.

Edy spells out the book's objective: "to provide a history of the women whom the U.S. government accredited as war correspondents, while exploring the construction, by the press, the public, and the military, of the category of 'woman war correspondent' and the concept of a woman's angle of war . . ." (2). On the whole, she succeeds, while making an important distinction between "the war correspondent" and "the woman war correspondent," noting that the former wrote "primarily for and about men" and the latter "primarily for and about women" (119). Yet, these two were hardly comrades in arms. The war correspondent "resented 'women war correspondents' not only because these women competed for facilities, stories, and access, but because the attention they drew was capable of influencing the public's perception of 'war correspondent'—as not necessarily a man's job" (121).

The nine chapters cover much ground, highlighting the names of journalists such as Jane Cazneau, who wrote about the Mexican-American War for the *New York Sun*, and Susette LaFlesche, an Omaha Indian who reported on the tragic outcomes of America's war against the Upper Plains Indians. However, its major thrust focuses on World War II and the women who tried to report it by begging and cajoling military officials to let them do their jobs. Even with permission, the work came with strict instructions to stick to the "woman's angle," which meant filing stories about "sanitation, medical care, rations, clothing, and supplies, as well as conditions for civilians" (27).

Early on, the fact that a newspaper would send a woman to report on war often



made news itself, causing consternation among male reporters. One Canadian journalist, quoting himself and his colleagues, exclaimed, about Kit Watkins who was in Cuba covering the Spanish-American War for the *Toronto Mail*: "A lady war correspondent! We looked at one another in doubt and indignation. After all, we said, there were limits to the sphere of woman's usefulness" (27). By World War II, as Edy notes, the novelty of the woman war correspondent was wearing off, and the military came to see the value of good reporting whether it was done by a man or a woman.

While all war reporters dealt with heavy government censorship and restrictions, especially on the front lines, women faced almost impossible odds of getting necessary credentials. The excuses from the military often rested on sexist rationales such as women needing special "facilities" because of their menstrual cycles, for example. As AP reporter Ruth Cowan aptly noted, the military always "trotted out" this excuse "when they wanted to discourage women war correspondents" (89).

As for Cowan, her story stands out in the book. She received the plum, top-secret assignment to report on the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) during "Operation Torch" (70), the Allied plan to invade North Africa. She could not tell her editor, who thought she was heading to England:

"But Mr. Evans, suppose, just suppose, the ship doesn't go to England."

Mr. Evans smiled reassuringly.

"Of course, you are going to England. You don't think the war department is sending WAACs to to North Africa, do you? They're fighting down there." (69)

She revealed nothing, recalling, "My first allegiance, my first loyalty, to whom did it belong? The AP or my country" (70).

In North Africa, she encountered another enemy, a hostile fellow reporter named Wes Gallagher, who, according to Cowan, constantly undermined her. Even her own boss at AP dismissed Cowan's complaints as coming from a "high-strung woman correspondent" (72). Yet, Cowan would be praised for her tireless reporting on the "woman's angle" from North Africa with one commander noting, "She wrote a flock of home town stories, just the right tales for mothers and relatives who want to know about those important facts of living, which most male reporters never see" (76).

As the book illustrates, not every woman war correspondent shared similar experiences. These were often determined by nationality (the French did not restrict their female journalists) or the military commander in charge. (General Dwight Eisenhower seemed sympathetic to these professionals.) Serious practical matters, such as potential sexual assault, also impeded them. Reporter Helen Kirkpatrick recalled, "If you have a whole bunch of men who have been in the army cut off from women and you put some young girl in their midst, this can cause certain problems" (110). About the restrictions placed on her, Kirkpatrick said they often had more to do with unhappy military officials who didn't like what she reported and less about her gender. She received the Medal of Freedom for her journalism.

Despite these women's bravery and diligence, they failed to pave the way for future women in journalism, according to Edy. In fact, it was expected that they give up reporting and return to their homes and families at war's end. This makes the book

a valuable addition to press history, and, as Edy notes, it should “help future scholars consider the impact that these correspondents’ milestones, setbacks, and writings might have had on the profession of journalism as a whole or on women’s perceptions of themselves, or even how these women might have influenced how men perceived themselves, their work, and the women around them” (10).

For the literary journalism scholar, the book contributes in another way, by containing superb appendices that are troves, full of new names to know and citations pointing to new writings that might warrant further consideration as part of literary journalism’s expanding canon. One citation, for example, may lead a literary journalism scholar to mine war reporter Iris Carpenter’s “Four Red Cross Girls Thumb Way into Paris” for its literary qualities (113n2). Elsewhere, the scholar might look at Appendix 1 and find that Cora Howorth Taylor Crane managed to be both a war reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* and a brothel owner (137.13). What might have been her “woman’s angle” covering the Greco-Turkish War? Another reporter, Teresa Pattern Howard Dean, went from covering Wounded Knee’s aftermath to China to cover the Boxer Rebellion (136.8). What would have been her “women’s angle”? With this book as a resource, the scholar might find that once the gendered label “women’s angle” is stripped away, what remains is literary journalism.

Vignettes from *Traveling the Northern Boundary*

Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey along America’s Forgotten Border
by Porter Fox. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018. Maps. Hardcover, 272 pp., USD\$26.95.

Reviewed by Mark Neuzil, University of St. Thomas, United States

In his new travel memoir, author Peter Fox turns the current political narrative about U.S. borders on its head. Instead of mucking around the U.S.-Mexico line with the many other ambitious journalists out there, he journeys north.

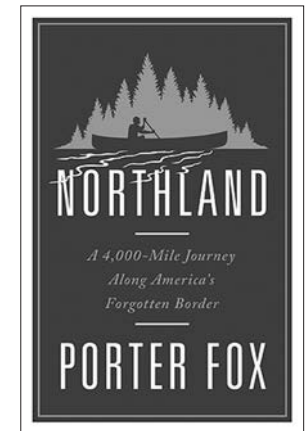
Fox moves by canoe, car, lake freighter, and shoe leather over the course of a three-year period that more or less covers the 4,000 miles between Maine and Washington state. Like the fine writer he is, Fox mixes modern characters and events with historical persons and details about the territory.

This is not one of those travel books, such as Robert Byron’s excellent *The Road to Oxiana* (1937), in which the author covers the entire ground in one long, arduous journey, battling dangers seen and unseen through virgin territory, deserts, mountains, bandits, floods, etc.

Rather, Fox’s book is divided into five parts, which play out east to west, and he does not attempt to traverse the entire distance all at once, or in total, nor does he even stick exactly to the border if events do not warrant it. He starts in his native Maine, which provides a setting for some of the book’s most evocative details as he covers the Maine-New Brunswick edge via the St. Croix River. Characters such as Patrick, a former DJ and now lodge owner, wear a “northland business suit—duck pants, suspenders, flannel, wraparound sunglasses” (48).

Fox then skips west a bit and hops on a freighter called the *Algoma Equinox* in Montreal for Part 2, sailing through the Great Lakes to Minnesota via Lake Superior. He continues his fascination with what folks wear. “It was interesting to watch people gazing at the ship. I wasn’t sure what solace it would give onlookers to know that the three men driving it were wearing Crocs and sweatshirts and laughing hysterically about their in-laws. That is not to say the *Equinox* crew is not highly professional. They are. It’s just that enough time on the water makes people a little kooky” (77).

Part 3 covers the Minnesota-Ontario border, the region with which I am most familiar. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Canada’s Quetico Provincial Park make up some of the wildest places left in and near the lower forty-eight



states. Here is where Fox joins with the veteran Arctic explorer Paul Schurke and his wife, Susan, and tries to keep up on a canoe outing. (Full disclosure: Schurke is a friend.) Next covered is the geographers' mistake known as the Northwest Angle—Angle Inlet, pop. 119—“a 120-square-mile chunk of America floating in southwestern Ontario” (138).

Part 4 examines the Dakota Access Pipeline conflict and the Standing Rock protest camp (the camp itself being a few hundred miles south of the border). This section is where Fox's journalistic chops come into play. The pipeline protests have been in the news, off and on, for some time, so his difficulty is telling the audience something they do not already know. Scene-setting and character development accomplish that goal. “There was a feeling in the air that the protest had morphed into something larger. Things were not good on American reservations. Of the 4.5 million people from 565 federally recognized tribes in the US, 30 percent lived in poverty. Alcoholism and mortality rates were 500 percent higher than for the rest of America” (155). On his way out, Fox passed through the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument: “There were no gravestones for Indians. A single monument to them had been installed 120 years after the battle” (177).

Fox is at his best when he meets the locals and gets a bit of understanding from them. The final section of the book is the “medicine line” of the forty-ninth parallel that cuts from North Dakota to Washington state. The Standing Rock theme continues, as Fox runs into a Blackfoot man at a campground desk who worked on siting the pipeline. “I couldn't tell people what I did,” the man said (199). Across Idaho, the reader is almost expecting the appearance of a white supremacist, a survivalist, a militia man, or some combination of the three. Sure enough, a militia man shows up in Coeur d'Alene. The detail the man shares with Fox is illuminating.

Fox's book is in the mode of a classic travel piece—it would not be considered literary journalism under most definitions because it lacks the style and structure of most fiction. And perhaps there are no larger lessons passed on in *Northland*, and maybe that is the point. Is it proper to think of a 4,000-mile-long border—or any border—as a single unit? So, as Fox has done, it is seen as a series of smaller stories set within a historical context, each with its own characters, experts, and narratives. As a result, the reader is rewarded with vignettes of the whole and left to think about the rest, including other borders where the societal conversation has turned much more intense, partisan, and divisive.