



Photo of Ted Conover by Tobias Eberwein.

## *IALJS–13 Keynote Address . . .*

### Immersion and the Subjective: Intentional Experience as Research

Ted Conover  
New York University, United States

**Introduction:** It is not a frequent occurrence to be given the opportunity of introducing someone the stature of Ted Conover. The task is at once a daunting endeavor and a humbling privilege, particularly if you consider yourself a student of literary journalism. Ted's books and his body of work are the stuff that bring us to conferences. He is, let's say, a subject of our study and an object of our interest as a prominent fully fledged literary journalist. Curiosity begged me to ask him what he felt when, in 1995, Norman Sims and Mark Kramer chose his work for their anthology, *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*.<sup>1</sup> "I was thrilled, of course," he said. But at the same time, Conover says it's not a label he uses to describe himself to others. "I'm just a journalist with truths to tell." Ted's stellar credentials precede him. As a journalist he has written for a smorgasbord of periodicals, ranging from the *New York Times* to *Vanity Fair* to *National Geographic*, not to mention the *New Yorker*. For sociologists, he might be described as the epitome of the participant-observer. For us, enthusiasts of journalism with a literary flair, he is the renowned author of books such as *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with American Hoboes* (1984), *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants* (1987), and *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in General Nonfiction. His most recent work, *Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep* (2016), explores the very essence of literary journalism. — Isabel Soares, President, IALJS

**Keywords:** immersion – first person – undercover – empathy – ethnography

First, thank you to Isabel Soares for the kind introduction, and thanks to David Abrahamson and the board for the invitation to speak to you today. And thanks to Tobias Eberwein for organizing everything.

As I don't need to tell this audience, Tom Wolfe died the day before yesterday. Would any of us be here if Wolfe had not been? It's hard to know. He was not only a founding practitioner of this literary craft, he was its chronicler and analyst. His analysis of what he said were its constituent parts—scene, dialogue, point of view, and status detail—strikes me as accepted orthodoxy now. I'd read most of Wolfe's books over the years—my favorite is *The Right Stuff*—but until I was writing up the bibliography for my book *Immersion* three years ago, I had never read *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. My friend Jay told me I had better, and so I did. What a joy to read.

Wolfe was doing what is now often called “immersion writing”—identifying a fascinating group of people, getting to know them, and then setting off with the group as, to some degree, one of them. He called it “saturation reporting”—another water metaphor, but it's the same thing. (*Harper's Magazine* titled its collection of first-person immersive pieces *Submersion Journalism*).<sup>2</sup>

I had not known that I was an “immersion journalist” until maybe ten years ago, when my colleague Robert Boynton of New York University suggested it. It's a label I accepted, though it doesn't apply to much of my work. Nor had I considered my background in ethnography to be a constituent element of this tendency until Boynton suggested that this was a way I might engage in a conversation with the academy. I am glad that the study of literary journalism includes both practitioners and theorists. My mind works basically on the level of experience and narrative, but I appreciate it when others take a step back and think about the underlying issues of experientiality and narrativity. I will leave it to experts who are here to decide if my remarks today do anything to advance the academic discussion.

Typically, when I'm at a podium, telling stories is what I've been asked to do. So let me start out with some early stories, and then share some thoughts on how I've come to value and pursue experience as the basis of my writing.

In junior high school and high school in Denver, Colorado, I wrote for the school newspapers. And I took long-distance bicycle rides with friends. We started out mainly riding into the Rocky Mountains and back, sometimes for several days at a time. At age fifteen, my friend Lane and I took a three-week trip by ourselves through New England. At age eighteen, my friend Ross and I rode from Seattle to the east coast, to begin college in Massachusetts. Riding across North America, we liked to say, was our way of getting to college.

The coast-to-coast journey was somewhat grueling, but at the same time it was exhilarating. My freshman year of college was harder. High school in Denver had been an easy place to earn an “A,” but writing essays for my courses at Amherst College was demanding, perplexing, even excruciating. In my “spare time” I wrote an account of the bicycle ride that had brought me there. My goal was to publish it in the school paper, which I did. To write about that experience was easier and more enjoyable for me than to write the papers my professors wanted. For one thing, I could write in the first person, which has always felt most natural to me. For another, I could write about something I had felt or seen myself rather than just read in a book. Experience was a topic that was genuine, and writing about my own experience put me in a position of absolute authority.

(Just as an aside: Journalism, at this point, was something I practiced and valued, but it was separate from writing about my experience.)

A year or two after I published about my bicycle journey in the weekly student newspaper, I wrote about it again in a class on personal essay (back then called “autobiography”). The assignment was to describe an occasion of celebration. What had I celebrated? How had I celebrated?

I had recently read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It's a travel book and a book of ideas, many of which perplexed college-age me, but one of which stuck in my head. A college instructor is trying to help a student who is having trouble writing. Narrow it down, he tells her: Instead of writing about the whole town, write about one building. Instead of writing about the whole building, write about the front of the building. “Start with the upper left-hand brick.”<sup>3</sup>

I decided to write about not the general experience of celebrating crossing the country on my bicycle, but about *the final hour* of my bicycle odyssey. The professor really liked it, and so I tweaked it and sent it to one of the handful of publications I subscribed to at the time, *Bicycling!* magazine (with an exclamation point!).<sup>4</sup> They bought it, to use in the column that comprised the final page of each month's issue. And they paid me \$100! Now we were getting somewhere.

A year later, I left college to spend a year as a VISTA Volunteer in Dallas. I worked as a community organizer for a poor people's group that published its own bilingual newspaper, *People's Voice/La Voz del Pueblo*. While I was there, the Hare Krishnas bought and moved into a former motel complex nearby; the decrepit units filled an entire block. I decided to write an article about the community for *People's Voice*. So I made an appointment to stop by. I was ushered into the office of a young man whose head was shaved except for a ponytail in the back and who was barefoot and dressed in a saffron-

colored robe. As I entered the room, this man stood up from his desk, took the long, heavy carnation garland from around his neck, and placed it upon mine. *Whoa!* What's the journalistic rule about *that*? I tried to refuse the gift and so I lifted it back over my head, but he looked shocked and upset when I did, so I put it back on. Later I marveled over it: They were proselytizing a community newspaper reporter!

I ended up spending three days in the community, during which I got up before dawn, chanted, helped to prepare vegetarian food, etc. The piece I ended up writing was a regular feature story, only lightly first person, but in retrospect I think the material I'd gained would have justified a deeply first-person piece about recruiting by cults, with my experience in this community an example.<sup>5</sup>

Not long after, I returned to Pamplona, Spain, where I'd spent five weeks as an exchange student in high school. You see, there was a girl there. And the local coordinator of the program said he thought he could get me a job in a big sausage factory, translating technical manuals. He helped get me the job, but I never did translate technical manuals—I simply worked on the different assembly lines, packaging aged chorizo, putting cans of meat products into cardboard boxes for shipping, etc. During the Festival of San Fermín, I got up at dawn, joined a group of my co workers who all were wearing the same blue and white checkered shirts, and ran with the bulls.

For years, I didn't write about it . . . until one Norman Sims, a professor of journalism at University of Massachusetts Amherst, whom I think some of you know, asked, along with his editor David Abrahamson, if I'd like to write a foreword for *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*.<sup>6</sup> Then finally, I got to write about that.

The most important watershed for me was the experience that began as ethnographic field work for my undergraduate anthropology thesis. It differed from my earlier experiences in important ways:

- It was a lengthy and difficult and unusual thing for a person my age to do;
- It was done explicitly for schoolwork (though my college wouldn't give me credit), so I had to pay really close attention and carefully document everything that happened;
- It was *about something other than myself*—real people, living in a way freighted with historic, mythic meaning. I wanted to understand how they looked at the world;
- And while it had an adventuresome aspect, like the bike rides or the summer in Spain, much of it felt more like a trial.

My advisors insisted that the first-person voice remain segregated from the rest of my thesis, in a final chapter that I titled, "A Field Experience in

Retrospect."<sup>7</sup> Writing that final chapter felt a bit like writing about my long bicycle journey had during the first semester of my freshman year. I wanted to do more of it and, as some of you know, I soon did, in what became my first book, *Rolling Nowhere*.<sup>8</sup>

My next books followed that pattern: imagine an unusual social world that I could take part in, insinuate myself in, find a place for myself in it. The goal, as in the projects I've just described, was to have an experience. Approached in a self-aware fashion, an experience produces scenes, characters, dialogue, point of view, and even, as Wolfe put it, status detail. If the people whose lives I visited were connected in some way to important issues (homelessness, immigration), then the experience could be topical, the book (or the writing) might be considered journalistic. My next projects, mostly books, were about a year of travel with undocumented migrants from Mexico; wealthy people in Aspen, Colorado; East African truck drivers and AIDS; prisoners and guards in New York's Sing Sing prison; and the way people interacted with a variety of roads around the world, from woodcutters along a mud track in Peru's Amazon rainforest to Israeli soldiers and Palestinian students in the West Bank, to freshly minted middle-class drivers in China to an ambulance crew parked inside a highway cloverleaf in Lagos, Nigeria.

#### First Person an Earned Perspective

Wolfe is present as a first-person narrator in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*<sup>9</sup> but just barely. It's now a frequent strategy in narrative nonfiction: The writer uses "I" not because she's important to the story as a character, but rather to help set a scene, to give the subject somebody to talk to. Over time Wolfe moved away from that—there is no first-person narration in *The Right Stuff*,<sup>10</sup> for example.

But I don't think this prefigured the current trend. My observation is that journalism, and our written culture generally, has been moving in the direction of more first person over the past thirty or forty years. Increasingly, journalism is making room for personal accounts. Memoir and personal essay began their boom in the 1980s and 1990s, and from there the rise of the internet lifted and carried first-person writing to new heights—or lows, according to your point of view. Among the reasons I see are:

- The move away from a presumption that journalists can be objective, and toward a journalism that is subjective but aims to be fair;
- The proliferation of first-person voices on the web, the lowered bar to publishing, alongside the decline of the primacy of a few main news companies or providers.

Finally, society's evolution away from a positivist model of knowledge—where to be worth mentioning, propositions must be provable—also seems relevant. In my mind, the traditional, 5Ws style of journalism reflects the positivist tradition, and literary journalism the humanist. So you have the “just the facts” tradition engaging in a conversation with a room full of poets; and literary journalism, at least sometimes, is the result.

The first person is something I'm open to, and even encourage in my teaching. But I tell students that in journalism the first person must be *earned*. It must be justified by the value it adds, generally in terms of interest. I explain to them that, while they should include details of their life experience that are relevant to their journalism, they should be careful about using too much because *we are not memoirists*. Writers of memoir have for raw material their remembered stories of *life-as-it-happened-to-me*. Writers of literary journalism have as their raw material their reported stories of *life-as-I-sought-it-out*. Our raw material is *reported*. We may borrow the memoir's “I,” which, as Vivian Gornick observed years ago in her seminal book, *The Situation and the Story*, is different from an “I” in fiction. She wrote:

A novel or poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Into those surrogates will be poured all that the writer cannot address directly—inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, anti-social desires—but must address to achieve felt reality. The persona in a nonfiction narrative is an unsurrogated one. . . . The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader.<sup>11</sup>

In memoir or literary nonfiction, the “I” must be sincerely inhabited, believed in, and ring honest and natural.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been reading the manuscript of a new book by Shane Bauer, the writer for *Mother Jones* who got a job as a private prison guard in Louisiana in order to write about the experience. His 35,000-word piece<sup>12</sup> was something of a sensation—it won the National Magazine Award for reporting, the Goldsmith Prize for investigative reporting, the Hillman Prize for magazine journalism, and many others. In the new book, to be titled *American Prison: A Reporter's Undercover Journey into the Business of Punishment*,<sup>13</sup> Bauer essentially adds to his long article by interleaving a historical story of U.S. prisons, particularly plantation prisons in the South. These historical chapters alternate with the present-tense, first-person story of Bauer's four months as a corrections officer for a private prison company. He makes a persuasive argument that the prison farms, an outgrowth of slavery, led organically to the growth of corporate prisons, whose use is growing

in the United States under President Trump after shrinking under President Obama. He tells the story, for example, of T. Don Hutto, who was warden at plantation prisons in Texas and Arkansas before becoming a cofounder of the Corrections Corporation of America. It's a very good book.

I found *American Prison* particularly interesting not just because I worked undercover as a guard for my book *Newjack*,<sup>14</sup> but because I'd read Bauer's first book, a memoir entitled *A Sliver of Light: Three Americans Imprisoned in Iran*.<sup>15</sup> Bauer was one of three hikers who, in 2009, with his wife and a friend, inadvertently crossed the border from Iraqi Kurdistan into Iran and got arrested. Bauer, in other words, is one of the few people on earth who has been a prison guard, and a prisoner, and can write.

There was little mention of Iran in his story for *Mother Jones* about working as a CO in Louisiana, and I wondered if there would be more in the book. The answer is yes, but not a lot—I would have welcomed more. What there is, though, is very effective. As he nears four months on the job, he finishes a twelve-hour shift during which he has found a prisoner carrying a packet of marijuana and sent him to solitary confinement for it. According to the terms of the job, of course, it's the right thing to do. But Bauer is conflicted about, as he puts it, “sending someone off to the dungeon for *drugs*.”<sup>16</sup>

The inmate's face is full of guilt. He says nothing. I put it in my pocket, walk out of the tier, and feel something heavy and dark pour over me. *What am I doing?*

When I get home, I draw a bath. I pour a glass of wine, then another, and another. I try to empty my mind. Inside me there is a prison guard and a former prisoner and they are fighting with each other, and I want them to stop.

I decide I need to end this. Four months is enough. I'm going to quit.<sup>17</sup>

The research strategy called immersion writing can be wonderful for producing literary journalism. It turns experience into research. It can turn an interview into an encounter. It suggests there's a place in journalism for a *journal*, a diary.

But let me suggest some contraindications. Immersion is not sufficient in and of itself, because not all experience is interesting. I'm a lifeguard at a swimming pool—so what? I'm driving a taxi—big deal! A writer who would attempt this approach needs to appreciate that sometimes experience is a story, while other times it is merely boring. That can be true even if a subject is in the news. Working in a prison? Thousands and thousands of people can tell you it's one of the most mind-numbing, uneventful jobs there is. You can grow old and unhealthy working in a prison. The would-be immersion

writer needs to consider whether her presence in that world, or her focus on it, might be inherently interesting.

Bauer's stories and mine both benefitted from the tension of secretive reporting. Would someone suspect our true identity? Might we inadvertently give ourselves away? Could liberal, college-educated us make it in that milieu? Also, notably, both of us sought out difficulty. I found work in a famous old prison known for its present-day chaos. Bauer found work in a newish private prison that few outside of Louisiana had ever heard of, a place where conditions were so bad (and wages so low) that they had trouble finding enough employees to keep it running. This is where a background in journalism helps one to judge the potential in a story. The journalist asks: Is there conflict, is there challenge? Is there urgency, are there links to larger issues? Is there a way for me to meaningfully participate in that world?

What a good immersion journalist appreciates, I think, is that unpleasantness and adventure can go together. Difficulty is often interesting. Of course, it doesn't need to be unremitting difficulty: Readers need a break now and then, and so do we.

A good immersion journalist, also, is not passive. Yes, you need to look and listen and be patient. Sometimes you need to be a fly on the wall. But if you are that fly, and nothing is happening in that room, then sometimes you need to relocate. You need to buzz over to a room that is more interesting.

Finally, like all journalists, in my opinion, a good immersion journalist should not think too highly of him- or herself, particularly when writing in the first person; which is to say, his or her narrative persona should not. He is not the subject. Rather, the subject is the subject, and the first person a way of writing about it, a way of telling a story. The writer might be crossing the border, he might be working undercover, but he is not the hero.

This is where empathy comes in. For if we are visiting the worlds of our subjects, and trying to understand them, we need empathy. Bauer and I direct ours in different directions. In both our books, the first-person writer is interested in the prison (as an institution), in the prisoners, and in the guards. But Bauer, I think it's fair to say, is a bit more interested in the prisoners, and I am a bit more interested in the guards. The why is an intriguing question. Part of it may be that Bauer himself was a prisoner for over two years in Iran. He has feelings about guards and prisons that are different from my own. Another part of it is probably that the guard cohort I was part of has a real culture, reinforced by a union and a long history of families and communities doing the same line of work. In Louisiana at the Winn Correctional Center, the guards may very well have been working at a Home Depot last month. And if prison doesn't work out for them, they might be at Walmart next month.

Also, I think we're different because of anthropology, which helped to form my journalism. While Bauer works firmly in the tradition of the undercover exposé, I'm more interested in an inside look at secret worlds, at interior understandings—by rituals, by relationships of dominance and submission, by the division of space, by the shared lingo of the keepers and the kept.

And not just an inside look, perhaps, but an inside *feel*—I want readers to know the dread I had most days when dressing for work, to understand the fear I repressed when I walked inside. And I want to share the aftermath of that repression, the dreams of being a prisoner that I had months later.

Anthropology also taught me reflexivity, pausing to consider the ways I was and was not “like them.” The ways that I could and could not understand their lives. Bauer expends his energy in other directions. He wants to show the dangerous negligence of the Corrections Corporation of America, the moral bankruptcy of the profit motive.

And we differ in our information gathering. Bauer writes about his use of a ballpoint pen that is also a voice recorder, and a watch that is a camera. The voice recordings let him produce substantial conversations—dialogue that is not merely recreated, as in most nonfiction, but actually transcribed. I spurned this kind of surreptitious note taking—to me it felt too invasive, the kind of thing a federal agent would do when trying to bust up the Mob. It would have made officers into my quarry, rather than my teachers, as in the ethnographic model. But wow, some of what Bauer captured is just stunning.

Both of us aim to show the impossible nature of the job: how hard it is to preserve one's humanity, one's better self, the corrosive effect of weeks and months of locking men in little boxes, of spending all day saying “no.” Bauer does this in his own way: He has passages on the discomfort of being gay-baited, of being treated like a sex object, that I would be proud to have written.

All of which is to say: There is no single way to do immersion reporting. How you do it will depend on your own predilections, and on the situation. Bauer and I both resolved not to lie when taking on our prison jobs. We had no problem with letting people draw a wrong impression, but we would not invent backstories or otherwise actively deceive. And we both shied from reporting on our subjects' personal lives outside of work, as that seemed beyond the pale, and extremely hard to justify. Both of us, while being willing to write a fair amount about ourselves, included in those disclosures stories of how we messed up. For me, at least, the goal is to connect with readers via transparency and, again, to not puff myself up as the hyper-competent, and confident, hero of my own tale.

But I hesitate to offer this approach as a universal prescription. There

is no single way to report literary journalism. I think we agree that the one indispensable ingredient is journalism, some kind of fact-based writing about events of the day. But that superstructure of the 5Ws can be adorned with all manner of humane sensibility, stories told in all kinds of ways—many of them, I'm quite sure, yet to be revealed.

---

*Ted Conover's address was delivered on May 17, 2018, at "Literary Journalism: Theory, Practice, Pedagogy," The Thirteenth Annual Conference for Literary Journalism Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences/Alpen-Adria-Universität, Vienna, Austria.*

---



### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Conover, "The Road Is Very Unfair," 301–42.
- <sup>2</sup> Wasik, *Submersion Journalism*.
- <sup>3</sup> Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 191.
- <sup>4</sup> Conover, "Finishing."
- <sup>5</sup> Conover, "God and Man in East Dallas." *People's Voice/La Voz del Pueblo* was a free monthly newspaper of Community People for Self-Determination, a grass-roots organization in Dallas, Texas, in the 1970s and early 1980s.
- <sup>6</sup> Conover, foreword to *True Stories*, ix–xv.
- <sup>7</sup> Conover, "A Field Experience in Retrospect," 190–213.
- <sup>8</sup> Conover, *Rolling Nowhere*.
- <sup>9</sup> Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.
- <sup>10</sup> Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*.
- <sup>11</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Bauer, "My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard."
- <sup>13</sup> Bauer, *American Prison*.
- <sup>14</sup> Conover, *Newjack*.
- <sup>15</sup> Bauer, Fattal, and Shourd, *A Sliver of Light*.
- <sup>16</sup> Bauer, *American Prison*, 264.
- <sup>17</sup> Bauer, 266.

### Bibliography

- Bauer, Shane. "My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard." *Mother Jones*, July/August 2016. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/cca-private-prisons-corrections-corporation-inmates-investigation-bauer/>.
- . *American Prison: A Reporter's Undercover Journey into the Business of Punishment*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018.
- Bauer, Shane, Joshua Fattal, and Sarah Shourd. *A Sliver of Light: Three Americans Imprisoned in Iran*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.
- Conover, Ted. "A Field Experience in Retrospect." In "Between Freedom and Poverty: Railroad Tramps of the American West," 190–213. Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Amherst College, 1981.
- . "Finishing." *Bicycling!*, May 1981.
- . Foreword to *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, by Norman Sims, ix–xv. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
- . "God and Man in East Dallas." *People's Voice/La Voz del Pueblo*, March 1979.
- . *Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- . *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- . "The Road Is Very Unfair: Trucking across Africa in the Age of AIDS." In *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, edited by Norman Sims and Mark Kramer, 301–342. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.
- . *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*. New York: Viking Press, 1981, 1984. Reprint, New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. New York: William Morrow, 1974. See also, "Excerpt," from Chapter 16, 190–202, para. 9. <http://www.drury.edu/academics/undergrad/core/pdf/readings/Pirsig.pdf>.
- Wasik, Bill, ed. *Submersion Journalism: Reporting in the Radical First Person from Harper's Magazine*. New York, London: New Press, 2008.
- Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.
- . *The Right Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.