



Matthew Ricketson, prior to delivering his keynote address, Port Jefferson, New York, May 7, 2019. Photo by Pablo Calvi.

IALJS–14 Keynote Address . . .

Navigating the Challenges of Writing Book– Length Literary Journalism

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Introduction: We are honored and delighted today to have Australia’s Matthew Ricketson, professor of communication, journalist, and author of three books, address our literary journalism association. Matthew has written a biography of Australian author Paul Jennings, a textbook about feature writing, and a monograph about literary journalism entitled *Telling True Stories*. He is the editor of two books—an anthology of outstanding Australian profile articles and *Australian Journalism Today*. His textbook, *Writing Feature Stories*, was revised for a second edition with a coauthor, Caroline Graham, and published in 2017. Matthew has won awards for his journalism, including the national George Munster prize for freelance journalism. In 2011, he was appointed by the federal government to assist Ray Finkelstein, QC, in an independent inquiry into the media, which was reported in 2012. He is also a chief investigator on three Australian Research Council–funded projects. Currently, Matthew is chair, board of directors, for the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma in the Asia Pacific Region, as well as the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance’s representative on the Australian Press Council. — Rob Alexander, IALJS Advisory Board Member, on behalf of the president, Tom Connerly.

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to give the keynote address at the Fourteenth International Conference for Literary Journalism Studies. I feel honored to have this opportunity. Looking at the list of previous keynote speakers, I noticed that one was from France, one from Norway, one from Portugal, and there were eight from the United States. So I am the first keynote speaker to this conference from Australia, indeed the first from the southern hemisphere. That makes me feel good. But then I noticed that among my predecessors, ten were men and only two were women. That makes me feel less than good. Because whatever I bring to this conference—and I do aim to offer you something you’ll find useful—I know there are a number of scholars in Australia who could well be standing here instead of me, and that most of them are women. So, at the outset, I would like to acknowledge the pioneering work and generous collegiality of some fellow Antipodeans: Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, Sue Joseph, Beate Josephi, Willa McDonald, Jennifer Martin, and Lindsay Morton.

The theme of this year’s conference is “The Literary Journalist as Naturalist: Science, Ecology and the Environment.” A long, important strand in the history of literary journalism has been writing about nature and the environment, of course, but since about 2000 we have been living in the age of the Anthropocene, in particular of anthropogenic climate change. Reducing the impacts of human-induced climate change is the most important environmental issue a literary journalist could write about; indeed, it is the most important issue facing the planet right now. Its scale and momentousness immediately raises the question: What on earth am I doing standing here talking about the ethical issues in writing book-length literary journalism; and, for that matter, why are you sitting there listening? Is it blind, Mr. Micawber-like optimism that “something will turn up”? Is it paralysis induced by our powerlessness in the face of evidence we feel daily on our skin that the planet is warming but that too little is being done to slow the trend to safe levels? Is it that we don’t know how to communicate the urgency of the situation to persuade people to act, be they politicians, CEOs of companies in the fossil-fuel industry, or the broad mass of citizens around the world? Probably all of the above, and more, but given this is a conference about literary journalism I’m going to focus on issues to do with communication, because the science may be settled on the question of whether humankind’s actions are the major contributor to global warming, but the politics aren’t.

Bill McKibben, journalist, advocate and founder of 350.org, wrote in the *New Yorker* late in 2018 that since 1988 when climatologist James Hansen testified before the United States Congress about the dangers of human-

induced climate change, carbon emissions in the United States have increased every year except for 2009 (the height of the global recession).¹ “Simple inertia and the human tendency to prioritize short-term gains have played a role, but the fossil-fuel industry’s contribution has been by far the most damaging.”² He goes on to outline in detail how scientists working for fossil-fuel industry companies knew about the dangers of global warming as long ago as 1977, how companies began calculating how best to take advantage of the thawing permafrost in the Arctic Circle, and how that, soon after Hansen’s testimony, an Exxon public affairs manager advised the company to “emphasize the uncertainty”³ of the scientific data about climate change. This information is so alarming as to stupefy us into a “Did-I-really-just-read-that?” state. Why is it not being followed up in the news every day, you might ask?

It is a good question that goes to a complex set of issues familiar to communication scholars. One of those, more familiar to people here, is about the role literary journalism plays in exploring issues and contributing to public debate. Few literary journalists—with the possible exception of Tom Wolfe—have ever claimed the kind of mass influence that television anchorman Walter Cronkite enjoyed in broadcasting’s glory years or even half as many twitter followers as the one million-plus following the *New York Times*’s Maggie Haberman. (Ted Conover, last year’s keynote speaker, has 1,207 twitter followers.) That does not for a moment mean literary journalists lack impact. It is just that how and in what ways their work makes an impact—beginning with their readers and radiating outward—is subtler, and less often studied. A starting point might be to invoke W. H. Auden’s poem, written after both the death of Sigmund Freud and the Nazis’ invasion of Poland in September 1939:

if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
to us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion.⁴

It is instructive, then, that when New York University’s journalism department brought together a panel of experts to find the one hundred best works of American journalism of the twentieth century, they nominated a work of literary journalism as number one—John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.⁵ It is hard to know how exactly you would measure *Hiroshima*’s influence but also hard to disagree that it created a whole climate of opinion. As literary critic Dan Jones has written, the atomic bomb attack demanded Hersey “provide forms for understanding what has been called history’s least imaginable event.”⁶ Which he did, as is well known. “I had never thought of the people in the bombed cities as individuals,” one reader, a university student, wrote to the *New Yorker* after it published Hersey’s article a year after the bombing of Hiroshima (and

Nagasaki) brought an end to World War II.⁷ If the reader's comment sounds odd, it underscores how easily we can cauterize our imaginations when we're faced with events of this kind, and highlights the chasm we need to cross to empathize with the victims. Hersey's rare achievement was to do that for millions of people, then and since.

We now face another of history's least imaginable events, though this time we face the prospect of destroying our planet slowly and in full knowledge we are doing so. And for that reason we need to not only empathize with the victims of human-induced climate change but find ways to create, if you'll pardon the pun, a whole new climate of opinion. That is a complex as well as urgent task, and one that many writers are engaged in. Bill McKibben I've already mentioned, and in Australia I would point to Jo Chandler, whose 2011 book *Feeling the Heat* invoked comparisons with the work of Rachel Carson, and Philip Chubb, whose 2014 book *Power Failure* recounted in dispiriting detail how Australia, a country heavily reliant on fossil fuel exports, failed to address climate change through a combination of political hubris, corporate greed, and union bastardry.⁸ What I have looked at in my research, and what I believe aids works that create a climate of opinion, are the ethical issues that arise in researching and writing book-length literary journalism.

As you may have noticed I have referred so far to book-length works of journalism, and that is for a reason. When journalism is practiced in books, ethical issues arise, some of which are common to daily journalism but some of which aren't. Or the ethical issues take on a different form by dint of the journalism being written in a narrative style and published in book form. These issues are both intrinsically important and have received less scholarly attention than the many ethical issues in news journalism. Use of the word "literary" in the term literary journalism can confuse because it implies journalistic work that is art or literature. Which immediately invites the question: according to whom? By what criteria? This is a perfectly good debate to have, and I would happily argue for the artistic and literary merit of a long list of journalistic works, but using literary or artistic merit as the prism through which you look at journalistic work has the effect of clouding three key issues: first, the implications of the extent to which this field of writing is practiced at book length; second, the range and complexity of the ethical issues that are inherent in taking a narrative approach to writing about people and events; and, third, the way in which many conflate a narrative approach with notions of literary merit.

Taking the issues one by one, scholars have understated the extent to which journalism is practiced at book length. Journalism written in a narrative style can certainly be found in newspapers, in the English-speaking world, but

it is more likely to be found in magazines, and, it appears, most likely to be found in books. I say appears because without universal agreement as to what constitutes this field, and because what might be called book-length literary journalism is subsumed into the broad publishing category of nonfiction, it cannot be enumerated exactly. An early study of the New Journalism, which is what literary journalism used to be called in the 1960s and 1970s, noted that much of it was published in book form.⁹ In 1996 Edd Applegate drew on seventeen anthologies and scholarly works to compile *Literary Journalism: A Biographical Dictionary of Writers and Editors*, which included journalists and editors working in newspapers, magazines, and in books. Even so, of the 172 people listed, 112, or about two-thirds, had written at least one work of book-length journalism.¹⁰ In 2007, the Nieman Foundation collated contributions from journalists and editors who had shared reflections on their practices at its annual Narrative Journalism conferences. Of the fifty-three contributors to *Telling True Stories*, thirty-six had written at least one work of book-length journalism; many had written several.¹¹ In 2009, Sarah Statz Cords compiled a readers' guide to investigative nonfiction entitled *The Inside Scoop* that contains more than 500 book titles, most of them published in the United States since 2000.¹² These figures show the practice of book-length journalism is more widespread than has been recognized.

Book-length journalism is surprisingly well represented in lists of Outstanding journalism. For the “Best American Journalism of the Twentieth Century,” thirty-eight of the one hundred works chosen were books. Of these, twenty-three were created as book-length works and fifteen were long magazine articles published as books or magazines articles or newspaper series extended to book length. An example of the first is Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*; an example of the second is Lillian Ross’s *Picture*; and of the third, Leon Dash’s *Rosa Lee*. The list of thirty-eight does not include shorter magazine articles collected and published in book form, such as Joseph Mitchell’s *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories*.¹³ Book-length journalism was also included in the best Australian journalism of the twentieth century—“Century’s Top 100”—a list chosen by a panel of industry and academic experts assembled by RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) University’s Journalism program, which at the time I headed. Of the one hundred chosen, fourteen were works of book-length journalism, and included Alan Moorehead’s *African Trilogy*, John Bryson’s *Evil Angels*, and Pamela Williams’s *the Victory*, among others. (The full list was published in the Media section of *The Australian* newspaper on December 9, 1999).¹⁴ The Pulitzer Prizes are well known as the most prestigious awards for journalism in the United States; less well known is the extent to which

one of the awards in the Arts and Letters section of the prizes, General Nonfiction, includes works of book-length journalism.¹⁵ Acknowledging that the boundaries between various nonfiction genres are porous, by my count twenty of the winners since the award's inception in 1962 have been book-length journalism. Among them: Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*; Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda's Road to 9/11*; and Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*. Finally, in Australia, since 2005 there has been a Walkley Award (the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prizes) for the best journalistic book, which each year attracts around seventy-five entries. Winners include: Chris Masters's investigative biography of shock jock Alan Jones, *Jonestown*; Stan Grant's *Talking to My Country*; and Louise Milligan's *Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of George Pell*.¹⁶

The importance of the extent to which journalism is practiced at book length is that books hold a different place in the cultural landscape, than newspapers, magazines, and online media. Most readers understand that news media are produced under unyielding deadlines, leading inevitably to at least some errors; they generally expect greater accuracy from a book that has taken at least a year and often more to produce and, accordingly, afford it greater cultural weight. Witness the volcanic impact in early 2018 of the first book-length journalistic account of the Trump presidency, *Fire and Fury*, by Michael Wolff.¹⁷ Even now, after the internet has disrupted (or worse) most of the media and communications industries, sales of printed books continue to far outstrip those of electronic books, and, despite repeated predictions of the demise of such an old-fashioned form, sales of physical books are rising, albeit modestly, according to the Association of American Publishers.¹⁸

The second issue obscured from view by a focus on literary merit is that ethical issues are inherent in the finding and telling of true stories; this seems almost self-evident but needs to be stated explicitly because of the third issue, which is the conflating of a narrative approach with literary merit. My argument is not that scholars of literary journalism have ignored ethical issues, but they examine them within the context of work that they have already argued is literary.¹⁹ This has led many critics to sidestep or excuse inaccuracies or embellishments or even downright inventions in work they judge to be literary, as I have discussed elsewhere.²⁰ Likewise, most critics have overlooked the question of whether the ethical issues inherent in representing actual people and events in a narrative style of writing are magnified or diminished by the practitioner's literary or artistic skills, or whether it is in the initial taking of a narrative approach that the ethical issues are triggered. This blind spot is evident in the differing critical receptions to the work of Bob Woodward, a newspaper reporter who has become a prolific, high-profile

practitioner of book-length journalism, and Truman Capote, a novelist whose “nonfiction novel,” *In Cold Blood*, was published in 1966 and had a major impact on generations of literary journalists. Applegate includes both in his dictionary; but where Capote is mentioned in twelve of the seventeen sources Applegate cites, Woodward is mentioned by none of them.²¹ Rather, Applegate’s choice appears to be founded in equating the use of a narrative approach with literary merit. He writes that in *The Final Days* Woodward and his coauthor Carl Bernstein “used dialogue, interior monologue, and candid description to depict characters, scenes, and emotions. The book was an example of literary journalism.”²²

Yet Woodward’s work has not been included in any of the seven major anthologies of either literary journalism²³ or creative nonfiction,²⁴ which may be understandable as no one, including Woodward, has ever claimed he is a great writer. “English was not Woodward’s native language” is what he, and his reporting partner, Carl Bernstein, wryly remark on the third page of *All the President’s Men*.²⁵ Woodward and Bernstein’s newspaper work has, however, won a place in two anthologies of investigative journalism.²⁶ The notion that ethical issues would be present in a work of narrative nonfiction acclaimed by many literary critics—Capote’s *In Cold Blood*—but not in the work of Woodward (and Bernstein), whose books are excluded from literary journalism anthologies, is, plainly, nonsense.

To sum up, choosing literary or artistic merit as the sole or primary criterion by which to analyze journalism can be misleading and suggests there is merit in examining what kind of ethical issues arise when journalism is produced in book form. I am thinking here not of ethical issues common to all journalism, which means not focusing, for instance, on whether Capote paid bribes to get access to the two convicted murderers in jail he was writing about for *In Cold Blood* or whether Woodward and Bernstein flouted Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure by trying to interview members of the Watergate Grand Jury.²⁷ When you start thinking about ethical issues unique to, or felt more urgently in, book-length journalism than in daily journalism, questions emerge: How do practitioners balance their need to maintain editorial independence with the closeness to key sources that comes from gaining a deep level of trust? Are there any limits to the kinds of narrative approach practitioners can take when representing actual people and events? Do some approaches to narrative, such as writing an interior monologue for an actual person, go beyond the bounds of nonfiction? And, how do readers read journalism in books as distinct from in newspapers, magazines, and online? If journalists present their book in a narrative style, is their work read as nonfiction or, because it reads *like* a novel, is it read *as* a novel?

I thought it useful to devise a framework in which to hold, articulate, and mull over the issues thrown up by the practice of telling true stories. Of course, I have drawn on and, I hope, built on the work of other scholars, including a number in this room, and others who aren't but whose work has been particularly helpful—Daniel Lehman's 1997 book, *Matters of Fact*, and Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's 2001 book, *The Elements of Journalism*.²⁸ There are three stages of this framework, beginning with the research phase, moving on to the representation phase, and finishing with the reception phase. Writers working on book-length projects conduct their research by gathering and analyzing documents, whether in print or online; by interviewing people; and by observing events at firsthand. The time available to practitioners of book-length projects to immerse themselves in the culture of those they are writing about offers the opportunity to become closer to sources than is customary in daily journalism and develop a trusting relationship that enables the practitioner to present such people, who I call principal sources, not in snapshots but in a more developed portrait. To do this, the journalist needs to gather material about the principal source's appearance, dress, and habits. Journalists will want to know how the source felt; responded in situations that are highly personal, or extreme; and that may have revealed the source in a poor light. Literary journalists need to find a balance between maintaining their editorial independence and managing the hurt they may cause by writing honestly about their principal sources.

In the research phase, perhaps the most difficult issue is how literary journalists negotiate and manage the fine, sometimes porous boundaries between the professional and personal relationships inherent in becoming close to principal sources. Janet Malcolm famously exposed to view the hidden underbelly of journalist-subject relationships in *The Journalist and the Murderer*,²⁹ asserting that journalists first seduced, then betrayed their subjects. It was a brilliant insight into a key element of journalistic practice that few if any journalists had previously discussed publicly, though it actually applied less powerfully to news journalism than to book-length journalism. Hindsight and various scholars' work show that it applied precisely to the dangerously enmeshed relationship that Truman Capote developed with convicted murderer Perry Smith while he researched *In Cold Blood*, as I have discussed elsewhere.³⁰ Malcolm offered an insight, then, rather than a framework for understanding the range of possible journalist-subject interactions. To put it simply, as Errol Morris writes, after reinvestigating the case that was the topic of Malcolm's book, her characterization is "like creating a general theory of human relationships based on Iago's relationship with Othello."³¹

In recent years, numerous practitioners have shown that it is possible to enter into and maintain a relationship with principal sources that takes on elements of ethnography, such as informed consent, and that continues common journalistic understandings of editorial independence. This means that unlike the journalist in Malcolm's book, Joe McGinniss, practitioners are able to ask their principal sources difficult questions and write things that would anger or upset them even if that jeopardizes their access to the principal source. It is bracing, for instance, to see the lengths to which Gitta Sereny went to inform Mary Bell about the likely additional problems she would face if Sereny agreed to Bell's proposal that she give her version of how Mary Bell committed murder at the age of eleven.

Did she realize, I asked her, that such a book was bound to be controversial? That people were bound to think she did it for money? That both of us would be accused of insensitivity towards the two little victims' families by bringing their dreadful tragedy back into the limelight and, almost inevitably, of sensationalism, because of some of the material the book would have to contain? Above all, did she understand that readers would not stand for any suggestion of possible mitigation for her crimes?³²

Sereny has deep compassion for Bell—Bell's mother attempted to kill her daughter on four occasions and included her daughter in her work as a prostitute—as is evident throughout *Cries Unheard*, but Sereny does not hesitate from confronting Bell when she believes Bell is lying or being manipulative. Nor did she lose access to Bell. Published in 1998, *Cries Unheard* is an extreme case but it illustrates the extraordinary reporting feats that can be achieved by practitioners who are not only determined to pursue confronting topics but take seriously their ethical responsibilities to both their subjects and their readers. All the information above is from Sereny's book. It is not only possible, then, for journalists working on book-length projects to disagree with their sources and maintain a working relationship, it could be argued that openness between practitioner and principal sources about the project and a preparedness to discuss disagreements are barometers of good practice.

In the writing phase of producing book-length journalism, practitioners are attempting to represent in words on a page what they have found during the research phase. Representation necessarily raises questions of ethics as well as aesthetics. It is easy for readers to see that journalism written in the inverted pyramid form, with its rigid format, formal tone, and institutional voice, is about actual people, events, and issues. When journalism is written in a narrative style, it resembles fiction and so invites the question: How does the reader know whether they are reading fiction or nonfiction? The

answer, according to narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott, is that unless they are told, they don't.³³ This may sound odd, but actually isn't. For most people, journalism is what comes up in their news feed on their mobile device, or it may still be what they read in newspapers, hear on radio, watch on television, or do all three online. Nonfiction is associated with information and knowledge. When it is written in a narrative style, the same issue of knowing what it is you're reading is raised. For the past two centuries the novel has been a highly popular book form. For many, books are synonymous with novels. Certainly, many of my students think that.

Readers are accustomed to a high degree of playfulness about authors' claims for a work of fiction. There is less scope for such playfulness in book-length literary journalism, which makes claims to be representing actual people, events, and issues. Regardless of how careful they are, writers ultimately cannot control how people will read their work. Readers may read a work as the writer hopes they will, or they may well find other meanings and interpretations. That we are unable to control exactly what readers make of our work does not absolve us of obligations to them. In any case, because literary journalists aim to reach the broadest possible audience, they need to assume readers have less, rather than more, knowledge of the topic. To put it another way, it does no harm to assume this, but there may be harm if you don't.

Why? Because once the reader begins reading, there is a range of ways writers can signal the kind of book being offered. To the extent that they avoid endnotes, notes on sources, and the like, and write primarily in a narrative style, they increase the likelihood their book will be read as if it were fiction, especially given that the majority of readers conflate a narrative style with fiction. This prompts a key issue. When a writer seeks to present the world as it is, the narrative style resembles that of socially realistic fiction. In such works, writers want to fully engage the reader's mind and emotions. They want to induce in the reader a dreamlike state of mind, as the novelist and creative writing teacher John Gardner terms it in *The Art of Fiction*.

If we carefully inspect our experience as we read, we discover that the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind. We read a few words at the beginning of the book or the particular story, and suddenly we find ourselves seeing not words on a page but a train moving through Russia, an old Italian crying, or a farmhouse battered by rain. We read on—dream on—not passively but actively, worrying about the choices the characters have to make, listening in panic for some sound behind the fictional door, exulting in characters' successes, bemoaning their failures. In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real.³⁴

Gardner argues readers of fiction may feel powerful emotions and may vividly experience the novel's imagined world, but they know that the people and events as presented in the book are not real. There are novels that include actual people and places and events, but they do not purport to be a verifiably accurate account of those people, places, and events in their entirety.

The reader's experience of fiction stems from their imaginative engagement with a series of black marks on a page, or pixels on a tablet. But when readers talk about their experience of fiction and use phrases such as "I couldn't put it down," or "I lost all track of time," or "I was off in another world," or "I was lost in the book"—and these phrases are clichés today—they are not voicing resentment but happiness.³⁵ The experience of being deeply engaged in a novelist's imagined world is welcome and pleasurable. To say a novel is enthralling is to praise it, yet the word gives a vital clue to the ethical issue arising when literary journalism is written with the aim of inducing in readers Gardner's fiction dream state. The word enthrall carries two meanings in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "to . . . hold spellbound, by pleasing qualities" and "to hold in thrall; to enslave."³⁶ A reader in thrall, you would think, is in an inherently vulnerable state, but the "enslavement" to the fictional world is felt as pleasure precisely because it is confined to it. It is a state of mind freely entered into, and though some novels may be keenly felt and remembered long after they have been returned to the bookshelf or saved on a tablet, the reader knows that however sad they may feel about, say, the death of Anna Karenina, she is a character existing only in their imagination from reading Tolstoy's eponymous novel. When a reader gives themselves over to, or is drawn into, this state of mind for a work of literary journalism, ethical issues are triggered by the differing power relations between writers and readers. If you write in a narrative style, then, you have an obligation to readers because of your efforts to "enthrall" them. Should writers resort to invention or seriously misrepresent people and events in their work, they will have abused the trust readers place in them. This is why, to take a famous example, even admirers of *In Cold Blood* are troubled when they learn that Capote invented the redemptive final scene in the book featuring Detective Alvin Dewey and one of the murder victims' friends.³⁷

Applying Gardner's fiction dream state is a powerful idea that can be expanded to take into account different readers' reading levels and the capacity of journalism written in a narrative style to engage us. Victor Nell, in his examination of "ludic reading," (that is, "reading for pleasure"), argues that what Gardner calls the fiction dream state, and he calls "reading trance," can be experienced by reading novels ranging from "trash"—his term—to those normally listed in literary canons.³⁸ Readers may differ in their abilities,

and novelists are free to pitch their works at any reading level they wish, but those writing book-length literary journalism have obligations to all readers, and once they understand the impact of the narrative style, the importance of their writing choices becomes clear.

The ethical issues in representation arise, then, because of the decision to take a narrative approach. The question of how well the book is written is a second, and in some ways a secondary issue. For instance, John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* about life—and death—in the deep South was intended as beach reading, while the work of much-awarded Polish literary journalist Ryszard Kapuściński has been effusively praised by literary critics; but both writers have been dogged by controversies over their blending of fact and fiction and whether they deceived readers.³⁹ Just because a work of literary journalism is superbly written does not necessarily mitigate or eliminate the ethical issues. It might be argued that a superbly written work intensifies them as it probably lodges deeper in the reader's consciousness. I don't want to argue for fixed links between ethics and levels of literary skill, as that connotes a mechanistic relationship between them, whereas the act of researching and writing is an organic as well as a mechanical process. It is possible for a practitioner to be a gifted wordsmith and unethical, and, too, for the reverse to hold. It is entirely possible that more complex interrelationships exist between any given practitioner's literary ability and the practice of ethical decision-making—a topic that invites further research. The key point is that the decision to take a narrative approach to writing about actual people and events triggers certain ethical issues in the writing that need attention before, or at the very least alongside, attending to literary issues.

Literary journalists, then, need to find a balance between their twin desire to write in a narrative style that deeply engages readers' emotions and one that engages readers' minds as well as their emotions. The former runs the risk of sensationalism; the latter more faithfully reflects people and events in their complexity. Whichever approach the practitioner favors, the work needs to be underpinned by a commitment to veracity. The demands on literary journalists to balance their twin desires is evident in a range of journalistic practices, such as the use of quotations, but it shows up most sharply in how literary journalists present their narrative voice, how they describe people, and when they reconstruct events as scenes. Practitioners need to consider whether some narrative methods are unsuitable for book-length literary journalism, such as trying to convey their sources' thoughts and feelings in interior monologues.

Writers and even scholars commonly talk about using the "techniques" of fiction in literary journalism; I've done it myself in a textbook, *Writing*

Feature Stories.⁴⁰ Such thinking, I now believe, perpetuates the mistaken belief that journalists deal always and only in objective, verifiable facts and that when they come to write books they will apply the techniques of fiction to facts. This in turn can encourage journalists to imagine dialogue or recreate scenes that the journalist did not witness. It is preferable when writing literary journalism to see that it is a practice requiring more extensive research than is possible in daily journalism and then representing what is found, not in the narrow form of the news report, but in a narrative conveying a broader, deeper account of people and events that takes in facts, atmosphere, emotions, context, texture, and meaning. This narrative approach will draw on elements of literary practice usually associated with fiction, such as characterization, dialogue, scenes, and authorial voice, among others, but they are not owned by fiction. As the award-winning literary journalist, Tracy Kidder, said in Norman Sims and Mark Kramer's anthology *Literary Journalism*: "They belong to storytelling."⁴¹

Novelists create their own fictional universe, but a literary journalist is confined to the actual universe. However much literary journalists may want to provide a compelling reading experience, they should be aware not only of Gardner's "fiction dream state" but of the limits of what they can know about any set of contested events and issues; whether it is, say, the mass killings by Anders Breivik in 2011 that Åsne Seierstad wrote about in *One of Us*, or the allegations of child sexual abuse against Cardinal George Pell that Louise Milligan investigated in her 2017 book, *Cardinal*.⁴² For this reason, the idea of an omniscient narrator, which is common in socially realistic fiction, is dangerous in literary journalism, as John Bryson, author of the award-winning, respected reinvestigation of the disappearance of baby Azaria Chamberlain, has acknowledged.⁴³ *Evil Angels* is written in an omniscient authorial voice, with Bryson seemingly absent from the narrative even though he covered the trial of Lindy Chamberlain for the murder of her daughter Azaria and disagreed vehemently with the jury's guilty verdict. A scene describing two journalists arguing about the verdict and punching each other into the hotel swimming pool is written in a third-person narrative voice, but what is not stated is that Bryson was one of the journalists! The contrast between Bryson's coolly magisterial, authorial tone and the anger he felt at the injustice to the Chamberlains is stark. *Evil Angels* remains an important book, but the contrast illustrates how misleading an omniscient narrative voice can be.

Jack Fuller, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of five novels, advises: "I would *always* sacrifice literary effects to the truth discipline."⁴⁴ So, thinking about this issue in the context of reconstructing scenes, literary

journalists need to ask themselves several questions: How important is the scene to the book, is the scene straightforward or highly contested, is it every day or intimate, how many eyewitness sources does the practitioner have, and is there supporting documentation?⁴⁵ These questions go to the gathering of material; there are other questions concerning where along the continuum practitioners sit, in either drawing the reader deep into their narrative mode or signaling to them the limits of their representation. Australian writer, Helen Garner, for instance, is famous for drawing readers' attention to the limits of what any one person can know about complex, murky events.⁴⁶

Let's consider a work that balances the tension inherent in reconstructing a scene; it is taken from Adrian Hyland's *Kinglake-350*, his account of the 2009 Black Saturday disaster that caused the worst loss of life from bushfires in Australian history. Hyland chose to make Roger Wood, the police officer on duty in the small country town of Kinglake, the person through whom we readers see, hear, and smell the fires that raged across the state of Victoria. Two-thirds of the fire's victims came from Kinglake. Hyland's is an inspired choice, and not simply because Wood and his fellow officer, Cameron Caine, won a police valor award for leading a convoy of fifty people out of Kinglake to safety, but because through him the reader sees just how little as well as just how much country cops can do to protect the community they serve in such a horrific event.

Mobile phones worked spasmodically that day; midway through a call home with Wood's wife Jo screaming at him that the fire had arrived at their home, the signal died. Wood furiously punched redial, but the phone rang out, the "ringtone tolling like a funeral bell."⁴⁷ From what he is able to see, the road to his wife and two young children is cut off by flames; not that he can even try to get home because there are so many others he is duty-bound to help. It is only after he and Caine have led their extraordinary convoy off the blazing mountain to safety that Wood tries his phone again:

For the first time all night, it's answered.

"Oh Rodge . . ." Jo's voice is drawn, weary. Enormously relieved. "I've been so worried about you. Been trying to call you all night."

"Same here. Worried you were dead." He blinks back tears. "Kids okay?"

"They're fine."

He slumps forward in the seat: the long-held tension slackens like a cut rope, and he's suddenly aware of the terror he's been struggling with for so many hours.

"It was that wind change that saved us." Jo is still talking. "It was only seconds away when it turned around." He is struck by the irony of that. The southerly buster that diverted the fire from St Andrews and saved his own

family had driven it up the escarpment to wipe out Kinglake.

“When are you coming home, Rodge? Everything’s still on fire down here.”

“Soon, honey,” he says. A wrenching need to be there. “Not just yet.”

“How’s Kinglake?”

“Pretty much wiped out.”

A brief silence. “You do what you have to, Roger.”

“Love you.”

“Yes.”⁴⁸

The scene vividly, poignantly conveys Wood’s experience: his twin loyalties to family and community and the enormity of what he endured. It provides a glimpse of the fire’s toll on him and his family, physically and emotionally. Thinking of the questions that a literary journalist should ask, the reconstruction is central rather than peripheral to the narrative, is intimate rather than mundane, and there appears to be no corroborating documents or eyewitnesses to the phone calls. The stakes, then, are high, but there are only two people in the scene and Hyland has interviewed them both at length. Notice, too, that the reconstruction goes no further than what the Woods experience. On the book’s release, Woods and Hyland were interviewed on ABC Radio National’s *Life Matters* program, and Woods praised the writer’s account without qualification.⁴⁹

Balancing the tension between veracity and creating a compelling narrative extends to what I think of as inculcating in readers an informed trust for literary journalism.⁵⁰ In addition to how literary journalists deal with issues of representation, they can build informed trust through what literary theorist Gérard Genette terms “the paratext,” which is material outside the body of the text.⁵¹ In *Paratexts* Genette was primarily concerned with fiction and poetry, but applying his framework to literary journalism makes visible the value of setting out the nature and range of source material, which includes prefaces, endnotes, maps, acknowledgments, notes to the reader on methods, and so on. These paratextual elements provide transparency about how what is in the book came to be in it, which is what builds trust with readers.

There are few better examples of this than Lawrence Wright’s account of the rise of Al-Qaeda in *The Looming Tower*, though *Going Clear*, his 2013 book about Scientology, comes close. Wright lists by name more than 550 people he interviewed, and in a detailed, extraordinary Note on Sources, he addresses directly the problem of writing about intelligence operatives and jihadis.⁵² He notes the shoddiness of much early scholarship about Al-Qaeda and the unreliability of sworn testimony of witnesses who have proven themselves to be “crooks, liars and double-agents.” He offers an example of a “tantalizing” piece of evidence that showed a high-ranking Saudi intelligence

officer providing to the CIA in 1999 the names of two of the eventual 9/11 hijackers but Wright did not include it because he could not verify it to his satisfaction. He conducted his research “horizontally” and “vertically,” that is, by continually checking hundreds of sources against each other, and by interviewing people in depth, perhaps dozens of times. By outlining his methods, he hopes “the reader can begin to appreciate the murky nature of the world in which al-Qaeda operates and the imperfect means I have sometimes employed in order to gain information.” Wright dislikes seeing anonymous sources used in books and “so I’ve dragged as many of my informants into the light as possible.” Some sources habitually ask for an interview to be off the record, but Wright has found they may later approve specific quotations that he checks back with them. Wright always ensures his tape recorder and notebook are in full view of his interviewees, to “remind both of us that there is a third party in the room, the eventual reader.”⁵³ The level of care and attention Wright pays to verifying highly sensitive material and his openness with sources, are a shining example of a literary journalist both enacting the virtue of truthfulness and carefully thinking his way through the complex, competing demands of his role.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions to draw from all this. First, there is a lot more journalism produced at book length than is commonly recognized. And that is a good thing. Second, it is important to ensure our choices about what is and isn’t literary journalism do not obscure the fact that ethical issues arise in all areas of journalistic practice, and to read book-length work with this in mind. Third, when journalism is practiced at book length, ethical issues arise *in addition* to those arising in daily journalism. Fourth, these ethical issues arise at all stages of the process, from the research phase to the representation phase, to how the work is received by readers. Fifth, in the representation phase, ethical issues are triggered by the journalist’s initial decision to take a narrative approach. Brilliant literary skill does not by itself resolve the ethical issues. Sixth, a lot of good work has been done, both by literary journalists, and those who study it, to find ways to resolve these ethical issues.

All this means that, seventh, a sizeable body of literary journalism about human-induced climate change has been produced in recent years that has created a climate of opinion that just may be bearing fruit. In an article published in May 2019, Bill McKibben argued for the importance of grassroots, or ground up, pressure for action on climate change given the abject, craven failure so far of governments.⁵⁴ Who knows exactly where this pressure, which he argues is close to a tipping point, came from exactly? I’d

wager, though, that at least one important source of this wellspring is the kind of literary journalism that cut through PR obfuscation with considered research and prompted thought about what is at stake for us and our children in prose that, as John Carey once wrote, contained “unusual or indecorous or incidental images that imprint themselves scaldingly on the mind’s eye.”⁵⁵

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Notes

- 1 McKibben, “How Extreme Weather Is Shrinking the Planet,” 46–55.
- 2 McKibben, 51.
- 3 McKibben, 52.
- 4 Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” 273.
- 5 “Best American Journalism of the Twentieth Century”; see also Stephens, “The Top 100 Works of Journalism.”
- 6 Jones, “John Hersey,” 214.
- 7 Natalie Moehlmann to *New Yorker*, September 3, 1946, quoted in Yavenditti, “John Hersey and the American Conscience,” 293.
- 8 Chandler, *Feeling the Heat*; Chubb, *Power Failure*.
- 9 Murphy, *The New Journalism*, 17, 26.
- 10 Applegate, *Literary Journalism: A Biographical Dictionary*.
- 11 Ricketson, *Telling True Stories*.
- 12 Cords, *The Inside Scoop*.
- 13 “Best American Journalism of the Twentieth Century.”
- 14 “Century’s Top 100,” 6–7.
- 15 Pulitzer Prizes, “General Nonfiction.”
- 16 “Walkley Winners Archive.”
- 17 Wolff, *Fire and Fury*; see also Ricketson and Tiffen, “The Chronicler We Deserve?”
- 18 American Association of Publishers, “AAP StatShot.”
- 19 Weber, *The Literature of Fact*, 43–55; Sims and Kramer, *Literary Journalism*, 3–34; Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 217–33. Gutkind, “The Creative Nonfiction Police?,” xix–xxxiii.

- ²⁰ Ricketson, *Telling True Stories*, 62–67.
- ²¹ Applegate, *Literary Journalism*, xvii–xix; see also, Applegate, “Truman Capote,” 47.
- ²² Applegate, 300.
- ²³ Sims, *The Literary Journalists*; Sims and Kramer, *Literary Journalism*; Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*; Chance and McKeen, *Literary Journalism: A Reader*.
- ²⁴ Talese and Lounsberry, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*; Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*; Williford and Martone, *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*.
- ²⁵ Bernstein and Woodward, *All the President’s Men*.
- ²⁶ Serrin and Serrin, *Muckraking! The Journalism That Changed America*, 132–35; Shapiro, *Shaking the Foundations*, 368–72.
- ²⁷ Clarke, *Capote*, 343; Bernstein and Woodward, *All the President’s Men*, 204–25; Christians et al., *Media Ethics*, 77–80.
- ²⁸ Lehman, *Matters of Fact*, 1–39; Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 47–68.
- ²⁹ Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*.
- ³⁰ Ricketson, *Telling True Stories*, 62–86.
- ³¹ Morris, *A Wilderness of Error*, 392–93.
- ³² Sereny, *Cries Unheard*, 16.
- ³³ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 147–50.
- ³⁴ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, 30–31.
- ³⁵ Nell, *Lost in a Book*, 1–2.
- ³⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. “enthrall.”
- ³⁷ Clarke, *Capote*, 358–59.
- ³⁸ Nell, *Lost in a Book*, xiii.
- ³⁹ Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*; Domostawski, *Kapuściński: A Life*; Dufresne, “Why *Midnight* May Be Darker Than You Think.”
- ⁴⁰ Ricketson, *Writing Feature Stories*, 228.
- ⁴¹ Sims and Kramer, *Literary Journalism*, 19.
- ⁴² Seierstad, *One of Us*; Milligan, *Cardinal*.
- ⁴³ Ricketson, *True Stories*, 134–37.
- ⁴⁴ Fuller, *News Values*, 143 (emphasis in original).
- ⁴⁵ Lorenz, “When You Weren’t There,” 74–80.
- ⁴⁶ Ricketson, *Telling True Stories*, 144–47.
- ⁴⁷ Hyland, *Kinglake-350*, 100.
- ⁴⁸ Hyland, 206–7.
- ⁴⁹ Ricketson, *Telling True Stories*, 175.
- ⁵⁰ Ricketson, 215–33.
- ⁵¹ Genette, *Paratexts*, 1–15.
- ⁵² Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 439–53; see also Wright, *Going Clear*.
- ⁵³ Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 447–49.
- ⁵⁴ McKibben, “Notes from a Remarkable Political Moment for Climate Change.”
- ⁵⁵ Carey, *The Faber Book of Reportage*, xxxii.

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