

Reviving the Elephant: Bringing Literary Journalism (ie. Memoir: ie. The Personal Essay) Back into the Classroom

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Overview

This unit will deal with several topics, among them the perceived difference, if any, among the terms literary journalism, creative nonfiction, the nonfiction essay, and where the concept of new journalism fits in relation to the above. The scandals of concocted stories winning prizes and then ruining promising careers and downgrading reliable newspapers, seem a part of all of this, as does the worry any nonfiction writer has, whether memoirist or war correspondent, with the foibles of memory. Can one embroider a detail or two for the sake of interest value, without being branded as a false writer? This and other knotty questions will be discussed in the unit as it defines other genres, but settles into literary journalism as an unlikely place, but an apt one, to begin writing with students too shy to write of themselves. They are, after all, just, well...so...ordinary. What they come to learn is that this 'ordinariness' is grist for the literary journalist.

The essay, a rather old and stodgy term which encompasses all the above terms, has become a white elephant in the classroom, unless it is being rigidly structured to teach a student the elements of persuasive essay (convince your high school principal of the need to change one of the school rules), or informational essay, which is a kissing cousin of the former, with the difference that one's 'opinions' should be kept out. Nothing but the facts, ma'am. A student might be directed to inform the reader (in at least five paragraphs) of the proposed plans for changes in the school's landscaping (though he/she might have to imagine what those changes could be), but not to discuss whether they would be beneficial or harmful. It is my contention that such assignments are tailor-made to aim for a decent test score, though it is unclear to what extent such artificial pieces bring up scores. Certainly, they do little to involve students in their own writing. In the case of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the most 'high-stakes' of the tests given, is

in the junior year, the PSSA, Pennsylvania's assessment designed to follow the dictates of the No Child Left Behind requirements. It is the first rung to determining if a student will pass high school. Following that, a student who scored below proficient will do a senior portfolio in either (or both) reading or math. Failing that, he/she has yet a second chance to patch up the portfolio and if still not passing, the student can try one last? time in summer school.

The value of today's continual testing - with the almost universally accepted ramification of teaching to the test - is a discussion to be held outside the realm of this unit, as is the fact that there is money attached to test scores and that even good schools with good scores can be pointed to as 'failures' if each year they don't improve scores by 'X' number of percentage points. Testing has resulted in a sad, dumbing-down of our curriculum in the well-meaning name of leaving 'No Child' behind, which is, of course, merely a phrase, and not an educational model. Such discussions are for another time. At the moment, I would like to examine the demise, in the classroom, of the true essay, and of how teaching and writing from this base could generate some real writers who feel what any writer must feel: gut excitement over their topics. I am a fellow of the Western Pennsylvania (and National) Writing Project, and it is our belief that students must have a sense of involvement and ownership in their writing (as well as the often uncomfortable and easily ignored concept, that a teacher of writing must also be a writer).

Rationale

Journal and Diary

The first clear aspect I see in the different terminologies listed above, is that there is sometimes writing which faces inward, and works to give a clear picture of the writer; such are the many journals and diaries available, which sometimes leave this reader feeling voyeuristic. John Cheever's self-absorbed journals, often read through what seems to be the writer's alcoholic haze, are sad and revealing glimpses of a talented man. Other journals focus on things seen and people met, such as Edward Robb Ellis's "Diary of a Century," which talked about impressions of Nixon, and of his meetings with Alger Hiss. While there are many of these available, my favorite is still May Sarton and her *Journal of a Solitude*. (all found in Bill Roorbach's, *The Art of Truth*) I find the use of these limited for the classroom, except to demonstrate for students how their own journals could be kept for later writing use, as well as for their own pleasure and insights.

Memoir

The memoir is a step beyond someone's daily ruminations, which is not to belittle the fun of reading diary and journal, and thereby following the day to day

thoughts and happenings of someone who thinks clearly and writes well. There is in the memoir a sense of time slowed down, which can lead to a deep understanding of the person and of the time in which they wrote. Still, the memoir, focused on a particular time, on specific people from the past, takes the reader on a more organized ride into a life. Here we can see a woman whose brother had a sex change and who, at eighteen, was hospitalized as a paranoid schizophrenic. Judy Ruiz) Tough stuff. The reader can be privy to the young lesbian's seduction of a friend, just out of the army, "big, blond, shy and butch", and later, her reconciliation with her sister and niece, "...if we are not beautiful to each other, we cannot know beauty in any form." (Dorothy Allison) All of these memoirs have an edge to them, and clearly fulfill a writer's need to tell about and to understand a piece of his own life, as well as to share it. Tobias Wolff's In Pharaoh's Army talks in part about fathers, his own (just out of prison), a friend's (violently anti-war), and the Vietnam War, and Wolff's own role in it as a paratrooper. It's fascinating reading, revealing certainly of the time, but primarily of the author.

Why then would memoir, as a genre, be so embroiled in controversy, at once a big money maker, and at the same time open to the charge of self-involved fluff, the quality of the writing no better than a romance novel, discussing personal revelations best left to TV talk shows or, better yet, left unsaid? Probably because there are badly written memoirs, as there are bad novels, poems or news articles, and certainly there are those which embarrass, as Kathryn Harrison's, The Kiss did, with its frankly written discussion of her affair as a young adult, with her manipulative father. Is it the inflammatory subject matter? Is it that we doubt the facts of her version? Do we consider, perhaps, that she concocted fictions and presented them as truth? Anna Quindlen states in her New York Times Book Review section article, "How Dark? How Stormy? I Can't Recall", "I will never write a memoir, even though the form has become the *oeuvre du jour*. I've got a lousy memory." As to all the details necessary for a memoirist to "make the memoir feel as though we are living a life in tandem with the writer who lived it first," she would have to "invent them." Do many secretly feel, with Quindlen, that Frank McCourt's wonderful memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, written fifty years after the living of it, is filled with such a wealth of specifics that she (we?) "can't for the life of me understand how he remembers...the raw itching sore that erupted between his eyebrows when he was a boy." Her suspicion of memory, calling it a "shapeshifter," is shared by many readers, to the point that there are those who feel false memories can be created. But what is to be most valued? Fact? Truth? Insight?

Bill Roorbach, in the introduction to his creative nonfiction collection, *The Art of Truth*, agrees that there is a fallibility to memory, that it is "always faulty." He speaks of writing as representational, of attempting to recover, to recreate some

form of experience and that all of this is a “form of memory, as is knowledge itself.” (Roorbach 2) In this genre of ‘literary’ memoir, (Roorbach adds the adjective to give good writing its due), there are hundreds of wonderful examples generously allowing us to share in times and lives. Annie Dillard, in *Modern American Memoirs*, edits one of the best.

Personal Essay

Roorbach divides his book, *The Art of Truth*, into two sections beyond journals and memoirs, adding the personal essay, and literary journalism (though he ends with a fifth section of specific subheadings of nature, travel, science and “creative cultural criticism.” To discover how the personal essay is differentiated from memoir, it is necessary to turn to the ‘father’ of this genre, (by his own admission), Michel de Montaigne (unless one considers precursors such as Saint Augustine’s spiritual searchings as in this vein or the letters of Seneca with their conversational style). Montaigne gave up his worldly work of lawyering and mayoring to retire to the family estate to write. As is often pointed out, *essayer*, the French term Montaigne used for his work, means “to try,” “attempts” or “trials”. So it is that Montaigne thinks on the page, tries out ideas, follows his thoughts in wondering, honest confrontation with the life around him, and his own complexities; he presents himself and his work as a model for insisting “that we ought first to look at our own personal experience—the book of life—and try to learn from it.” (Lopate 44) All of this stems from the concept that we are all part of the human condition, and, as such, have much to learn from one another, no matter how individual our experiences seem at first glance.

It should be noted that, to take this tale of labels even further, there are classifications within the essay genre, of formal or impersonal, and also, the informal essay, of which the personal essay is a subset. Lopate quotes Holman and Harmon’s *A Handbook to Literature* as characterizing the formal/impersonal essay by “seriousness of purpose, dignity, logical organization, length...practically identical with that of all factual or theoretical prose writing in which literary effect is secondary to serious purpose.” Lopate also credits Holman and Harmon for clarifying the informal essay as having “the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic.” They distinguish it from the personal essay, which they define as “a kind of informal essay, with an intimate style, some autobiographical content or interest, and an urbane conversational manner.”

Perhaps these definitions will be seen as helpful, perhaps as hair-splitting. They can, at least, open the discussion for students, giving them, as this course’s

instructor, Jim Davidson, said, “a chance to consider what they’re dealing with, and what the limits are.” I like Roorbach’s discussion of the personal essay as being filled with the all the layers of knowledge, experience and contradiction as are found in a good conversation, with ‘personal’ referring to “the person, the individual soul at the center of the writing, that soul that is the beating heart of all creative pursuit...”(191) He acknowledges this as denoting a relationship with the memoir, but sees the personal essay as diverging from storytelling to “begin thinking (on the page, of course, and figuratively) about the meanings of the story told, using scenes and images and events from the writer’s life—the stuff of memoir—as evidence for a kind of argument.” There is then the story related as conversation, and then analyzed to try to determine what the stories mean. There can certainly be structure here, but “the successful personal essay is always an experiment in form.” (Roorbach 193)

I find it interesting that excerpts from James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* are used as both books of personal essay and of memoir. (He was, of course, accomplished in both fiction and nonfiction writing.) So, too, are works by Ralph Ellison included in both, with each piece seeming to overlap the other in terms of personal experience and commentary on the story. Vivian Gornick is in the essay section for a work from 1996 and in the memoir book for a 1987 piece. Here, I see clearly the difference. Her memoir is a story of the past, of family, and a neighbor; the essay, “At the University: Little Murders of the Soul,” discusses and analyzes the deadly life found for a visiting professor in various college towns. (Personal essays were in Roorbach, and memoirs in Dillard’s collection)

Literary Journalism

Then come those writings termed literary journalism, when the view of the writer turns outward, when the world becomes more important than the point of view, the person, or the writer...sometimes. Fact Vs Fiction. Memory Vs Imagination. These tugs and pulls and competitions are evident within the genre of journalism. Originally simply a straight reporting of facts, journalism aimed (and still aims) for objectivity, and so far as a human being is able to push aside personal opinion and bias, the reporter does not exist. These are other people’s stories, and we are informed as to what is happening. The inverted pyramid still exists, giving us the bulk of our Who’s, What’s, Where’s, When’s, Why’s, and often even the How, within the first paragraph or two of an article---the famous 5W’s and an H, of newspaper writing. That this straight journalism is hard to achieve, can be found by comparing the two Pittsburgh papers, *The Post-Gazette*, and *The Tribune-Review*, where differences in articles on the same events, show that even facts can be bent, or are conspicuous in one and omitted in the other. Toss in *The New York Times*, and there can be a still different feel, a different take, on the same news.

As opposed to this strived-for professional detachment and impartiality, the literary journalist is openly involved in her story and with her subjects. The reader never doubts whose point of view is at the center. There are pioneers within the field, those who first strayed from the confines of giving just the facts. It was Matthew Arnold in the late 1800's, who first used the term "new journalism," though there are many who would attribute that to Tom Wolfe, whose personal hype and book of the same name, led many to that assumption. (more later on Wolfe and his considerable contribution to writing) Arnold, the famed literary critic, described the writing style of one, W.T. Stead, of the Pall Mall Gazette, as brash, vivid, personal reform minded—"and occasionally, from Arnold's conservative viewpoint, featherbrained." (Kerrane 7) Arnold went so far as to describe journalism itself as "literature in a hurry."

Journalism splintered from early reporting and took on many of the attributes of literature. As Sims says, "Twenty-five years ago when Tom Wolfe raised the debate, literary journalism was not yet on anyone's list of artistic prose forms." There are many attributes of literary journalism which overlap with fiction. The language itself can be seen as literary, with clear and often beautiful imagery, (or clear and terrible in its startling reality). People become as real for us as the characters developed in a work of fiction, with backgrounds and personalities finely honed. The facts themselves become dramatic in the telling, and while plot is not the best term, the narrative unfolds as surely as the most carefully devised plot, and certainly in a way that is far different from the events discussed in traditional journalism. In literary journalism there is, in addition, often a point of view, presented in a human, recognizable voice; there is the possibility of a real opinion, presented fairly and accurately, certainly a higher standard than the old, so-called accuracy. Dialogue often is used rather than quotations, and the story much of the time is presented in scenes. In short, both fiction and nonfiction contain good storytelling. Perhaps here is a time to turn the definitions around. It is not merely that we want students to see that ordinary facts and people become dramatic and fascinating in nonfiction, but that within a fine piece of fiction, many truths are inherent. That "fiction" has become synonymous with untruth, is a shame.

An example of a work incorporating all of the above is John Hersey's, *Hiroshima*, deeply personal, but biasless responses to the dropping of the Atomic bomb. (See appendix B for the opening pages) Hersey's narrative followed six ordinary people in Hiroshima, survivors of the August 6, 1945 bombing, as they dealt with life immediately after the explosions. This writing was seen as so important that the whole of the August 31, 1946, *New Yorker* issue was devoted to it, arousing enormous controversy. Hersey, a young reporter, was in Hiroshima by September 1945, and spent hundreds of hours listening to the survivors, assembling pages

and pages of hand-written notes. While the decision as to which facts to use, in what was deemed the most effective order, was Hersey's, we hear clearly the survivors' own voices. Nowhere do we read Hersey's specific reaction to the bombing, but only the compassionately told stories of six people, who gave face and voice to an enormous event, personalized the instant deaths of 100,000, and the countless maimed and infected, much as *Night* gave a reality to the genocide of 6,000,000 through Elie Wiesel's own memoir of survival.

In Cold Blood, 1965, Truman Capote used scenes and dialogue to reconstruct the 1959 murder of an Iowa farm family. It differed from *Hiroshima*, in that Capote interviewed the two young killers without a tape recorder and took few notes, claiming he had a phenomenal memory. The argument around which hot debate swirled with this book was that only the dead would have been privy to such words and happenings. Capote called his book a nonfiction novel, and claimed it as a new genre. Where was the accuracy in this reconstruction? Can reconstruction be valid reporting? To what extent is the mixing of techniques dangerous? Has the blurring of lines from nonfiction to fiction become excessive, confusing? I believe that at base, course instructor Jim Davidson has clear advice: "We should always read carefully their [writers'] description of their working methods. And if they don't deign to tell us how they were somehow privy to a subject's private moments, we should trust those writers less than we trust those who do explain it." Are we then justified in considering Capote's work as more novel and less nonfiction?

Roorbach (5) begins to answer these charges, though to my mind he does not validate the reporting methods of Capote, feeling that such controversies often stem from a preoccupation with the verifiability of facts. For a response, he leans on the artistic endeavor, and the creative effort, while citing the demand for accuracy insofar as it is humanly possible to attain.

Listen: verifiable accuracy is not one of the primary values of creative non-fiction, as it must be for traditional journalism or science...sometimes, especially in memoir and memory sections of personal essays, it must hold the door for the greater values of drama and character, and the peculiar artistic forces of memory... And here we run into ethics, which are as individual as voice. I believe an over-insistence (as opposed to a reasonable insistence) on verifiable accuracy has about the same deadening effect on art as an overinsistance on conformity in style and subject. What's verifiable isn't always what's true and the writer of creative nonfiction will always err on the side of truth over facts.

What we can watch for and laud, are those fine pieces which take responsibility for both truth and fact.

Certainly, Roorbach is not talking about intentional deceit, or even a casual approach to fact finding or verification. He's not condoning a Janet Cooke, who in her zeal for the story, created a twelve year old heroin addict who was a composite, she later acknowledged, of many of the children she encountered in the course of her reporting. Her fabrication unmasked, Cooke lost her Pulitzer and her job at *The Washington Post*. It is further disheartening that questions have been raised as to whether there was evidence of her talking with any real children at all. Any reader has the right to believe that what he reads is honest and as close to factual accuracy as the situation allows. Roorbach titles his anthology, *The Art of Truth*, and includes in it all the aforementioned genre, subtitling the book, *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*. Ben Yagoda and Kevin Kerrane, on the other hand, name their anthology, *The Art of Fact*, and omit all but journalism created from an "active fact gathering, not just working from memory or sensory observation." (13) Yagoda then goes on to discuss the necessity of a work being current, so that a writer will "get on the story soon after it happened." He terms the 'literary' part of the subtitle, *A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* as necessarily being "thoughtfully, artfully and valuably innovative." (14)

Aside from the rather weak adverbs linked to the "literary", there remains a problem here, with the concept of "currency" which seems to work against two of the basic tenets behind literary journalism. First, the immersion of a writer in a subject or story, often over time (generally accepted by everyone as a cornerstone of literary journalism), would tend to minimize the concept of currency, as by the time a true story had been gathered, the blush of immediacy would probably have dissipated. George Orwell lived a year ('38-39) in Marrakech, and wrote a series of vignettes of the city, which showed the effects of colonial rule in much the same way as his famed essay "Shooting an Elephant." Tracy Kidder says of the year he spent in a nursing home, "I can spend five hundred hours taking notes and use none of them, and then in ten minutes everything happens." From his book *Old Friends*, comes "Memory." (Sims 371)

I set out with a general issue—old age—and found myself in a particular nursing home and facing a particular group of people. At that point all the issues of aging ceased to interest me much. They're not interesting except when they're in a context of real people. I wanted to look at aging from the inside. I wanted to get close to what really matters—what it's like to be old.

Secondly, literary journalists' focus on the ordinary, the "everyday events that bring out hidden patterns of...life", as Sims (4) put it, defuses much of the 'breaking news' concept of journalism. As Mark Kramer puts it in his portion of the intro to *Literary Journalism*, which he edited with Sims, "Truth is in the details of real lives." (Sims 34) Everyday events, or those small details, can become metaphors for the larger issues facing a people or a nation. This can be

seen in the oft quoted Dr. Samuel Johnson, as he wrote of the Scotch in *A Journey to the Western Islands* (published in 1775). He termed the Scottish windows “incommodious”, a fact which “keeps them very tightly shut,” and, for Johnson, symbolized the national character. (Sims 3)

Even with like-minded writers and academicians, we can see the natural tensions at work between accuracy and art; between truth and fact; between memory and imagination. The back cover blurb from *Literary Journalism* (Sims) reads: “The Passions of the Journalist Meet the Craft of the Novelist” while the back of *The Art of Fact* (Kerrane) presses home its point that the pieces within “offer the double pleasure of true stories artfully told.” We want both art and solid reporting. Perhaps in the best of literary journalism we can find just that.

While the above is a great last line, I want to muddy the waters a bit by introducing a 2005 publication titled *The New New Journalism* by Robert S. Boynton, who maintains that the New News draw on their predecessors’ literary innovations but tend more toward the muckraking tradition “of Jacob Riis and Lincoln Steffens.” (xi) This “new generation experiments...they’ve developed innovative immersion strategies.” (xiii) “With their muckraking and intensive reporting on social and cultural issues, the New New Journalists have revived the tradition of American literary journalism.” (xxx) While Boynton spends time on and gives the early writers their due, his preoccupation into making such old-timers as Gay Talese, John McPhee, and Calvin Trillin into New News seems unwarranted at best. Nonetheless, *The New New Journalism* is interesting in that he documents conversations on writing with many fine authors.

Literary journalist Richard Ben Cramer, reviewing Boynton’s book in *The New York Time Book Review* of 3/20/05, writes in “Gonzos for the 21st Century,”

The New New category turns out to be not much more than a loose net to trap a bunch of writers Boynton happens to admire. Still, these interviews deepen our understanding of ‘literary journalism’, a more inclusive tag than either New or New New Journalism. Did New Journalism knock the novel off its pedestal, as Wolfe promised? Not really....Even Wolfe seemed to concede defeat when he abandoned the form to write novels of his own.

An interesting final tag to the News or the New News or the fiction vs nonfiction debate, is found in Boynton’s interview with Michael Lewis:

Whereas journalists once felt humbled by the novel, we now live in an age in which the novelist lives in a state of anxiety about nonfiction. You see it most clearly with films in the lust to be able to put at the end of the film, ‘This is a true story.’ And in the scramble for the ‘real world,’ whether that is in ‘reality television’ or any other form.

Interesting, and that's the truth!

Objectives

While I believe this unit meets many objectives for students, they generally fall into four categories. The first would be in the realm of wide reading. Students will be allowed to read from a great many personal essayists and literary journalists. We will include memoirists for the sake of the second category, which will be the discussion of differences among all these labels, which have been amply discussed in prior portions of this study. Our discussions will center around what students see in the various readings, to enable them to chart their findings and to inductively arrive at some of the conclusions surrounding labels. We will also hope to let them see overlap, and the continuing fuzziness when attempting to hold to strict labels. Learning to put the lie to the often taught, strictly structured lists and protocols of a high school classroom, and to see that art, as with life, is complicated and interesting, would be a lesson well learned.

A third objective will be the appreciation for the historical precedent in literary journalism. That we can go back to the 18th century and earlier for some of the “modern” components of journalism, is both fascinating and humbling, which is not to say that there is no change and progression to watch for.

Finally, a main objective to this study, will be in the writing, when students would try to incorporate many of the novelistic aspects of good literary journalism into their own factual pieces.

Strategies

Strategies for this unit are relatively simple. Excerpts will be decided upon which exemplify memoir, personal essay, and literary journalism. In many cases, there will be overlap in specific works, but determining this is a part of the learning process. Ways these can be used will be discussed under Classroom Activities.

Memoir

Within the genre of memoir, I would suggest using an Annie Dillard excerpt from *An American Childhood* (Roorbach 95) which is all about her and her experience in Pittsburgh and longings to escape it all. This I would follow with some of Mary Karr's “The Liar's Club”, as hard edged as Dillard's is dreamy. (Roorbach 143) Then, from Dillard's collection of *Modern American Memoirs*, try Ralph Ellison's excerpt from “The Little Man at the Chehaw Station” which comes from his second collection of essays, *Going to the Territory*, published 36 years after

Invisible Man won the National Book Award in 1953. To those who only know Ellison by his marvelous, but painful novel, this memoir will be a surprise.

Personal Essay

For personal essays, there is no better place to begin than with E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" from his own collection *One Man's Meat*. (198) Here he tries to recapture the time of his own youth, with his son, and, as is the case with the essay, White looks outward from the experience. William Hazlett should be sampled, both for the age of the piece (he wrote in the early 19th century,) and for his passion. "On the Pleasure of Hating" begins with a spider and ends with a king. (Lopate 189) Students should get to know the neglected work of James Baldwin, considered among the finest of 20th century essayists. Lopate (587) takes from *Notes of a Native Son*, an excerpt which discusses his father's funeral at the time of race riots in Harlem. A second E.B. White essay, "The Ring of Time", written close to the time of Baldwin's, moves from the circles ridden by a circus bareback rider, to segregation. (Lopate 538) One final personal essay, edging into the realm of travel, is by poet Naomi Shihab Nye, and takes us back to her grandmother in a Palestinian village of the West Bank. "One Village" is from Roorbach's, *The Art of Truth*. (465)

Literary Journalism

Some of the suggested pieces under this heading have been previously discussed, but will be brought together here for ease of choice. Richard Harding Davis' 100-year-old account of a Cuban execution should not be missed, and besides the selection in Appendix A, can be downloaded from Amazon.com as an e-book, for \$1.99. This reporter, a favorite of Teddy Roosevelt's, is an early proponent of new journalism. His story is compelling and the images he creates in *Cuba in War Time*, are crystal clear. Then there is John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Is it a literary piece in factual, journalistic form, or is it reporting which uses literary techniques? It is a wonder of horrors beautifully written. See Appendix B or use an excerpt such as "The Fire" (Roorbach 305).

The famous in the field should be read, such as Norman Mailer's scene by scene "Turkey Shoot", from *Executioner's Song*, as he traces the execution of Gary Gilmore, shot in Utah after the Supreme Court overturns the ban on capital punishment. (Roorbach 336) Tom Wolfe has to be read, and anything read by him clarifies why he altered journalism, even if he didn't invent the term New Journalist. From *The Right Stuff*, an excerpt titled "Yeager", tells it all. (Roorbach 398) Just a sample, as the piece begins with the voice of an airline pilot using the voice of Chuck Yeager, who was born in "West Virginia, in the coal country, in Lincoln County, so far up in the hollows that, as the saying went, 'they had to

pipe in daylight.' In the late 1940's and early 1950's this up-hollow voice drifted down from on high, from over the high desert of California, down, down, down, from the up reaches of the Brotherhood into all phases of American aviation. It was amazing. It was Pygmalion in reverse. Military pilots and then, soon, airline pilots...began to talk in that poker-hollow West Virginia drawl, or as close to it as they could bend their native accents. It was the drawl of the most righteous of all the possessors of the right stuff: Chuck Yeager."

Ben Yagoda (*The Art of Fact*, ed. with Kevin Kerrane) says that Wolfe's "appropriation of point of view—long a fictional technique but rarely used by journalists" is utilized in taking "the values and perceptions he sees in his subjects [to construct] a kind of community narrative voice, capable of modulating from fairly straight exposition to out-there stream of consciousness...Wolfe did it first and best." From *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, (Kerrane 182) and the Kesey, Cassady, "drug-addled bus trip: "they are all rapping and grokking over the sound it made—'Wowwwwwwwww! Did you—wowwwwwww' as if they had synched into a never-before-heard thing, a unique thing...like if it was all there on tape they would have the instant, the moment, of anything, anyone ripped out of the flow...and they had it on tape—and played it back in variable lag shakkkkkk-akkk-akkkk-akkkoooooooooooo." You had to have been there.

John McPhee is a must. Try his nature reporting from *Annals of the Former World* as he and his party explore the Sonoma Range in western Nevada. (Roorbach 442) Compare the travel reporting of Eddy Harris' piece from *Mississippi Solo* (Roorbach 476) with Nye's, discussed under the personal essay, and one more, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. (Roorbach 424) For examples of immersion reporting, discussed previously, students should be exposed to Tracy Kidder's "Memory," from his 1993 book *Old Friends* (Sims 371), and/or Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Herr wrote his book about his time in Vietnam as a reporter, from all the notes which had been beyond what he could file for newspapers. An excerpt, "Illumination Rounds" can be found in Roorbach. (326)

For sports reporting with a modern edge, try Jimmy Cannon's account of the second Joe Louis-Billy Conn fight. The images and the surprising subjectivity, a near psychological analysis, in "Lethal Lightning" are masterful. (Kerrane 461)

For more on "the dignity of ordinariness" as Susan Orlean put it (Sims 4), try that book for her "The American Man at Age Ten" (99), or James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with an excerpt that takes "Overalls" and "Shoes" of Alabama tenant farmers with whom he lived for six weeks, and emphasizes their dignity in the midst of grinding poverty. As he had been hired by Fortune Magazine, no less, at the height of the depression, to illustrate the awful social

deprivation, he couldn't sell his articles, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the book into which he poured his heart and observations, sold only 600 copies. (Kerrane 417) Or put in another Tom Wolfe, from *The Art of Fact*, and see how "The Girl of the Year" again captures the voice of a total scene, an actual era. (469) Finally, and it is obviously hard to stop choosing, use the magnificent Rebecca West, with her world view and finely honed powers of description, capturing in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and the exquisite description of a peasant woman in Bosnia. (Kerrane 452)

Just one last, short list of books which would make wonderful additions to classroom libraries or sources for excerpting:

Drink Cultura: Chicanismo—Jose Antonio Burciaga

Alchemy of Race and Rights--Patricia Williams

Indian Givers --Jack Weatherford

The Writing Life--Annie Dillard

Mississippi Writers—Reflections of Childhood and Youth, ed. by Dorothy Abbott

The Donkey Inside--Ludwig Bemelmans (travel, Ecuador)(yes, he of *Madeleine* fame)

Black Like Me—John Howard Griffin (who eventually died from complications stemming from the skin-darkening chemical he ingested)

These cover a huge range of backgrounds, styles and intents, and will be briefly annotated in the bibliography.

Classroom Activities

The following are basically writing assignments to use with the various excerpts and books discussed in previous portions of the unit.

1. The personal essayist needs to work for tensions between two values or opposing goals, such as the zeal to get things done, Vs the pull to be lazy on a beautiful day. Students need to work at these push-pulls or find some semblance of virtue in an apparent evil as Hazlett does in his piece "On the Pleasures of Hating." Beginning writers need to be wary of taking a strong stand on some obvious good; they will find after a few paragraphs there is nothing more to say and what they have already said is hardly fresh.
2. Take pieces with a strong clear form and imitate that essential. For example:
 - a) study Davis' slow, slow descriptions, which stretch our anticipation for what will happen.
 - b) Copy Hersey's technique with the same moment seen by multiple subjects. Study also how these people are brought to life by Hersey.
 - Try c) the technique of Mailer as he uses episodes or small scenes in "Turkey

- Shoot.” Pay attention to imagery used in all of these, though this may need to be a second layer after the technique has been practiced in phase one.
3. Practice the use of the candid, intimate voice, which unlike formal language, tends to reveal how people really are (institutions as well), but remember Mark Singer’s prohibition that “you can’t take an idea and write about an idea.” Perhaps, while the focus can be on voice, there must be a subject. Try for something of interest, but of an ordinary quality, such as dogs at a park, garbage collectors, or church women.
 4. On anything written, remember to second layer with imagery.
 5. The listening interview is a cornerstone of the reporter. Use “real people in real places” as John McPhee urges. Follow the dictates of Joseph Mitchell, who says his great virtue is that he is never bored. “If I talk to them long enough, the most amazing things come out...Select the revealing things of his life.” In other words, let the subject talk, and listen, listen, listen. Along with the listening and the conversation, try to tape record as well as to take copious notes.
 6. The immersion story! Pick an idea which over time can be followed as Kidder did with the nursing home, or Herr unavoidably did in Vietnam. Again, to use John McPhee, you “go to the market” or any place which really interests, “and when you get done you’ve got this pile of stuff.” Check to see “how many people can be developed as characters so they are really standing free, in the round?...places, scenery, the science involved, the history, the landscape—You’re not inventing it. You’re making something of a potpourri of raw materials” (Sims 18) Aim for a place you can visit again and again. See what comes out from under the surface. This a long-term project—at least a month.
 7. Digression. Begin with Mark Kramer’s quote about the writers in his anthology who “while telling tales, repeatedly look directly at the reader, comment, digress, bring in associative material, background, previous events...then reengages the story...Good story tellers often digress at moments when especially interesting action is pending, and not at the completion of action.” (31) By moving away from the narrative, a writer can, according to McPhee, “provide background information or build the emotional foundation for a thing.” (Sims 8)
 8. As Wolfe has done in the various excerpts discussed, try to create a whole scene where the language matches what is going on and the whole of the writing flows with the same voice.

9. Respect for the Ordinary. This has often been discussed and is inherent in a number of the above exercises. Students can begin by keeping a journal listing places and people that might serve as grist for writing if there were only time.
10. Recreation of scene. This was suggested in number 2, by using Mailer as a model. More work on this I-am-A-camera, point of view needs to be done. The source here is not novelistic techniques, but on those of the movie or play. Approach less than significant, earthshaking events, where you have a chance of being present. Again, focus on the ordinary, perhaps people waiting for tickets, or for fireworks to begin and then reacting to them.
11. It should be clear, but bears repeating, that while the above activities are written activities, a large part of this unit is involved with analyzing and discussing what is found in any kind of essay. What is found to be similar and different among them is what will give students a sense of how works are written and how writing creates a different effect on the reader.
12. Finally, to reiterate a wonderful and important bit of information for students: everyone has a story. It's hard to convince students not only that their own stories have import, but that by listening, hunting for the novelty in someone else's ordinary life, their own become sources of material. This has been said before, but now, as a final activity, the lesson allows students to incorporate themselves into their writing, whether on the level of a memoir, or as the slightly more outward-looking, make-sense-of-my-life, personal essay.

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White, E.B. *One Man's Meat*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1938.

One of the finest essayists, known more widely for his children's books. He takes the simplest topics and allows us to see that they mean more than we would have originally thought.

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An eloquent, autobiographical essay in which the author reflects on the intersection of race, gender and class.

Appendix A

Cuba in War Time by Richard Harding Davis
(an excerpt detailing a Cuban execution)

Adolfo Rodriguez was the only son of a Cuban farmer who lives nine miles outside of Santa Clara, beyond the hills that surround that city...(59)

I witnessed his execution and what follows is an account of the way he went to death. The young [19] man's friends could not be present, for it was impossible for them to show themselves in that crowd and that place with wisdom or without distress, and I like to think that although Rodriguez could not know it, there was one person present when he died who felt keenly for him, and who was a sympathetic though unwilling spectator.

There had been a full moon preceding the execution, and when the squad of soldiers marched out from town it was still shining brightly through the mists, although it was past five o'clock. It lighted a plain two miles in extent broken by ridges and gullies and covered with thick, high grass and with bunches of cactus and palmetto. In the hollow of the ridges the mist lay like broad lakes of water, and on one side of the plain stood the walls of the old town. On the other rose hills covered with royal palms that showed white in the moonlight like hundreds of marble columns. A line of tiny camp fires that the sentries had built during the night stretched...at regular intervals and burned brightly. (60)

Appendix B

Hiroshima by John Hersey
(excerpt of pages 1-2)

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk. At the same moment, Dr. Masakozu Fujii was settling down cross-legged to read the Osaka *Asabi* on the porch of his private hospital, overhanging one of the seven deltaic rivers which divide Hiroshima; Mrs. Hotsuzo Nakamura, a tailor's widow, stood by the window of her kitchen, watching a neighbor tearing down his house because it lay in the path of an air-defense fire lane; Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German priest of the Society of Jesus, reclined in his underwear on a cot on the top floor of his order's three-story mission house, reading a Jesuit magazine, *Stimmen der Zeit*, Dr. Terufumi Sasaki, a young member of the surgical staff of the city's large, modern Red Cross Hospital, walked along one of the hospital corridors with a blood specimen for a Wasserman test in his hand.

Appendix C Content Standards

The following content standards for the Pittsburgh Public Schools have been addressed in this unit

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.

Arts and Humanities

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.