

## Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists

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Ballantine Books

1/1/1995

When writers, readers, English teachers, librarians, bookstore people, editors, and reviewers discuss extended digressive narrative nonfiction these days, they're fairly likely to call it literary journalism. The previous term in circulation was Tom Wolfe's contentious "New Journalism." Coined in the rebellious mid-sixties, it was often uttered with a quizzical tone and has fallen out of use because the genre wasn't really alternative to some old journalism, and it wasn't really new.

Literary journalism is a duller term. Its virtue may be its innocuousness. As a practitioner, I find the "literary" part self-congratulating and the "journalism" part masking the form's inventiveness. But "literary journalism" is roughly accurate. The paired words cancel each other's vices and describe the sort of nonfiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what's happening -- the essence of journalism.

This journalism in fact has proper pedigree. Daniel Defoe, writing just after 1700, is the earliest cited by Norman Sims, one of the few historians of the form. The roster also includes Mark Twain in the nineteenth century and Stephen Crane at the start of the twentieth. Before and just after the Second World War, James Agee, Ernest Hemingway, A.J. Leibling, Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross, and John Steinbeck tried out narrative essay forms. Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion followed, and somewhere in there, the genre came into its own -- that is, its writers began to identify themselves as part of a movement, and the movement began to take on conventions and to attract writers. Public consciousness of a distinct genre has risen, slowly.

In the 1970s John McPhee, Edward Hoagland, and Richard Rhodes -- among others now in their fifties and sixties -- broadened the form, joined in the 1980s by several dozen (then) youthful counterparts, including Tracy Kidder and Mark Singer. Richard Preston and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, the youth of this collection, began publishing in their twenties, and both had studied literary journalism in seminars -- a sure sign a new genre has arrived. Another sign is a change in its treatment by book review editors. They used to assign area experts routinely -- geologists to review McPhee's "Basin and Range" (1981), computer programmers to review Kidder's "The Soul of a New Machine" -- with neither brand of scientist generically qualified to assay the subtle narrative techniques and deft wordsmithing. Now editors are likelier to assign such reviewing to other writers and to critics.

New forms of the written word that catch on are infrequent literary occurrences. Still, writers will forever seek ways beyond the constraints by overlapping cousin-genres-travel writing, memoir, ethnographic and historical essays, some fiction and even ambiguous semifiction stemming from real events -- all tempt fields just beyond rickety fences.

Literary journalism has been growing up, and readers by the million seek it out. But it has been a you-know-it-when-you-see-it form. The following annotated list of defining traits derives from the work in this anthology and works by other authors I've cited. It reflects authors' common practices, as the "rules" of harmony taught in composition classes mirror composers' habits. But however accurately represented, rules for making art will surely be stretched and reinvented

again and again.

1. *Literary journalists immerse themselves in subjects' worlds and in background research.*

Speaking at a relaxed meeting of the Nieman Fellows at Harvard University, shortly after he'd won the Pulitzer Prize for "The Soul of a New Machine," Tracy Kidder enraged several young journalists with an offhand comment -- that literary journalists are, overall, more accurate than daily journalists. He recalls telling them, "It has to be true; our reporting takes months, and you're sent to get a story and write it up in three hours, and do two more before leaving work. A privileged journalist might get a few weeks for a feature."

Literary journalists hang out with their sources for months and even years. It's a reward -- and risk -- of the trade, as I've discovered on many projects. I spent one glorious June with a baseball team; I wandered intermittently in backwoods Russia through six years of *perestroika* and the ensuing confused transition. I spent a year in hospital operating rooms, and years in the fields and corporate offices of America's farms. Every writer in this anthology has had similar experiences. The reporting part of the work is engrossing and tedious. It is not social time. One stays alert for meaningful twists of narrative and character, all the while thinking about how to portray them and about how to sustain one's welcome.

The point of literary journalists' long immersions is to comprehend subjects at a level Henry James termed "felt life" -- the frank, unidealized level that includes individual difference, frailty, tenderness, nastiness, vanity, generosity, pomposity, humility, all in proper proportion. It shoulders right on past official or bureaucratic explanations for things. It leaves quirks and self-deceptions, hypocrisies and graces intact and exposed; in fact, it uses them to deepen understanding.

This is the level at which we think about our own everyday lives, when we're not fooling ourselves. It's surely a hard level to achieve with other people. It takes trust, tact, firmness, and endurance on the parts of both writer and subject. It most often also takes weeks or months, including time spent reading up on related economics, psychology, politics, history, and science. Literary journalists take elaborate notes retaining wording of quotes, sequence of events, details that show personality, atmosphere, and sensory and emotional content. We have more time than daily journalists are granted, time to second-guess and rethink first reactions. Even so, making sense of what's happening -- writing with humanity, poise, and relevance -- is a beguiling, approachable, unreachable goal.

2. *Literary journalists work out implicit covenants about accuracy and candor with readers and with sources.* No Un-Literary-Journalistic-Activities Committee subpoenas the craft's corner cutters. Literary journalists, unlike newspaper reporters, are solo operatives. You can see the writers here, in their first few paragraphs, establishing their veracity with readers by displays of forthrightness and street savvy. These are important moments. They imply the rules the author elects to follow. Readers are the ultimate judges of which authors don't play fairly. They have had the last word in several publicized cases. Two areas of ethical concern often jumble together in discussions of the scrupulousness of literary journalism: (a) the writer's relationship to readers and (b) the writer's relationship to sources.

(a) *The Writer's Relationship to Readers*

A few distinguished essayists we retrospectively link to literary journalism did indeed commit acts that, if done by writers today, would be considered downright sinful: They combined or improved upon scenes, aggregated characters, refurbished quotations, and otherwise altered what they knew to be the nature of their material.

What distinguished them from fiction writer may have been merely intention -- presumably to convey to readers the "sense" of an actuality. In fact, one of the genre's grand old men, Joseph Mitchell, whose work is in this collection, has written about and spoken to interviewers about using composite characters and scenes in his 1948 classic "Old Mr. Flood." John Hersey, author of "Hiroshima," did the same thing with the main character of his 1944 article "Joe Is Home Now" (however, he later complained about the practice among New Journalists). Mitchell never complained, and neither writer did it again.

I have no trouble comprehending the liberty of either of these artists trying things out. Other pioneers, including George Orwell (in "Shooting an Elephant") and Truman Capote (in "In Cold Blood" (1966)) apparently also recast some events, and my private verdict is to find them similarly exculpated by virtue of the earliness (and elegance) of their experimentation, and by the presumed lack of intention to deceive. None violated readers' expectations for the genre, because there weren't yet strong expectations -- or much of a genre, for that matter -- to violate.

Still, if you reread those essays having learned they portray constructed events, you may find yourself second-guessing what was real. One wouldn't bother doing this with a novel. The ambiguity is distracting. Today, literary journalism is a genre readers recognize and read expecting civil treatment. The power of the prose depends on the readers' accepting the ground rules the works implicitly proclaim.

There is a category of expectations, and I'd argue it describes material that falls outside the modern understanding of what literary journalism is. By the time he published "The Executioner's Song," in 1979, about a triple murderer named Gary Gilmore, Norman Mailer elected to specify his liberation from restrictive factuality. The dust jacket bore the odd description "A True Life Novel." Although such truth-in-labeling doesn't explicitly demarcate what parts are actual, it's a good-faith proclamation to readers that they've entered a zone in which a nonfiction writer's covenant with readers may be a tease, a device, but doesn't quite apply. It would take a naive audience to misconstrue clearly self-proclaiming "docudramas" such as Errol Morris's "The Thin Blue Line" (which Mark Singer writes about in this collection) or Mailer's sort of "docufiction." Most reader swill instead savor, whether as art or entertainment, the deliberate byplay of reality against fancy, in this often wholesome, but always special category of film and prose that straddles the line.

However, chats with writer friends and panel discussions at writing conferences have me convinced that literary journalists have come to share a stodgier tacit understanding with readers, one so strong that it amounts to a contract: that the writers do what they appear to do, which is the get reality as straight as they can manage, and not make it up. Some, of course, admit in private to moments of temptation, moments when they've realized that tweaking reality could sharpen the meaning or flow of a scene. If any writers have gone ahead and actually tweaked, however, they're not longer chatting about it to friends, nor talking about it on panels. In recent years, a few literary journalists have drawn heavy fire for breaking trust with readers. It is not a subject about which readers are neutral.

Conventions literary journalists nowadays talk about following to keep things square with readers include: no composite scenes, no misstated chronology, no falsification of the discernible drift or proportion of events, no invention of quotes, no attribution of thoughts to sources unless the sources have said they'd had those very thoughts, and no unacknowledged deals with subjects involving payment or editorial control. Writers do occasionally pledge away use of actual names and identifying details in return for ongoing frank access, and notify readers they've done so.

These conventions all add up to keeping faith. The genre makes less sense otherwise. Sticking to these conventions turns out to be straightforward.

Writers discover how to adhere to them and still structure essays creatively. There's no reason a writer can't place a Tuesday scene prior to a Monday scene, if the writer thinks readers should know how a situation turned out before knowing how it developed. It is easy to keep readers unconfused and undeceived, just by letting them know that you're doing. While narrating a scene, a literary journalist may wish to quote comments made elsewhere, or embed secondary scenes or personal memories; it is possible to do all these things faithfully, without blurring or misrepresenting what happened where and when, simply by explaining as you go along. Like other literary journalists, I've found that, in fact, annoying, inconsistent details that threaten to wreck a scene I'm writing are often signals that my working theories about events need more work, and don't quite explain what happened yet.

Not tweaking deepens understanding. And getting a slice of life down authentically takes flexibility and hard labor. Readers appreciate writing that does the job. It is not accidental that the rise of literary journalism has been accompanied by authors' nearly universal adherence to these conventions, which produce trustworthy, in-the-know texts and reliable company for readers.

*(b) Writer's Relationships to Sources*

The writer's reliable companionship with sources can cause difficulty. An inescapable ethical problem arises from a writer's necessarily intense ongoing relationships with subjects. Gaining satisfactory continuing access is always a tough problem; most potential subjects are doing quite well at life with not writers anywhere in the neighborhood, and their lives are tangles of organizational and personal affiliations. Yet, in order to write authentically at the level of "felt life," literary journalists will seek from subjects the sustained candor usually accorded only spouses, business partners, and dearest friends. Strong social and legal strictures bind husbands, wives, partners, and pals to only the most tactful public disclosure of private knowledge. Literary journalists' own honorable purposes, on the other hand, require as much public discourse as possible.

During the months a writer stays around subjects, even a forthright relationship (that has commenced with full discussion of intentions, signing of releases, and display of part articles and books) is likely to develop into something that feels to both parties a lot like a lot like partnership or friendship, if not quite like marriage. The ticklish questions the writer comes up against are these: Does the subject see himself revealing information to a friend, at the same moment the writer sees himself hearing information from a source? And, how responsible is the writer for the consequences of such perceptions?

Writers, in good faith, try all sorts of ways to get and keep good access without falsifying their intentions. The most obvious has been to write about people who either don't mind or else actually like the prospect of being written about. Anthropologists say "access downward" is easier than "access upward." Literary journalists (including me) have had cordial continuing access to people far from the world of books, who just like the company of the writer and the sound of the project -- including hoboes riding the rails, migrant workers sneaking across the border, merchant seamen, teen prostitutes, high school football players, plain dirt farmers.

Another category, exemplary subjects -- a dynamic schoolteacher, a deft surgeon, a crew of tip-top carpenters, a dexterous canoemaker, a hard-bargaining corporate farm executive -- also welcome attention, sometimes because they have causes they hope to represent, such as bigger

school budgets, lessened malpractice liability, or fairer crop subsidies.

My own rule has been to show part articles, to make clear the public exposure involved, to explain my publisher's and my commitments of time and money, to stipulate that subjects won't get to edit manuscript or check quotes. Then I go ahead -- if I'm still welcome after all that, and sometimes I'm not. In a few cases, I have doubted that subjects understood my intentions or their consequences well enough to consent, or I've felt consent hadn't been freely given but was influenced by boss's orders (for example, the nurses in an operating room where my subject worked). Then, I've made it my business to do no harm. By luck, I've been able to write what I wished, without having these occasional moments alter essential content. Every genre, whether daily or literary journalism, poetry, or fiction, ultimately depends on the integrity of the writer.

3. *Literary journalists write mostly about routine events.* The ecology of convenient access impels literary journalists toward routine events, not extraordinary ones. The need to gain long-term, frank access has forced writers to seek material in places that can be visited, and to avoid, in spite of longings to the contrary, places that can't. The level of access required is so high that it has largely determined the direction of literary journalists' efforts.

The goal during "reporting" or "fieldwork" is not to become socialized as an insider, as an intern at a firm might en route to a job. It is to know what insiders think about, to comprehend subjects' experiences and perspectives and understand what is routine to them. Insiders who eventually read a literary journalist' account should find it accurate and relevant, but not from an inside perspective. At, first, when I spent time with surgeons, blood alarmed me -- an unsurgeonlike attitude. By the end of a year witnessing controlled mayhem, my attention had shifted. I knew when the surgeon found bleeding routine, and recognized the rare moments when it alarmed him. My rookie reaction wasn't relevant to the surgeon's world; my later reaction served me better in comprehending his perspective.

Routine doesn't mean humdrum. Most anyone's life, discovered in depth and from a compassionate perspective, is interesting. Some very routine subjects, however, haven't been breached, and seem unbreachable except by insiders. Oddly, one major constrain is legal. Commission from a national magazine in hand, I once approached an attorney well known for effectively defending many suspected murderers. He was tempted by the prospect of an article about his daily work. I sketched out the access I'd need -- including entrance to his office discussions with and about a current client. The attorney backed away. I'd be out beyond the umbrella of attorney-client privilege, he said, and could be challenged, and perhaps subpoenaed, for questioning on what I'd heard. His client could then sue him for malpractice.

Uncontaminated access to top levels of big business during a major deal has also proved nearly beyond reach, mostly because corporate sources perceive that allowing a journalist to roam might exceed prudent fiduciary responsibility, and might subject them to suit. Also, businesspeople work repeatedly within a circle of associates, and whoever let in a writer unbound by the circle's prospect of mutual advantage could be seen as breaking trust. Writers occasionally do make it through these barriers. A few kiss-and-tell versions of business deals have also been written by former players. And writerly *post-factum* reconstructions sometimes re-create dramas of complex deals.

A cousin, true-crime reporting, also reconstructs events *post-factum*. Murderers usually try not to do their work in front of writers. But criminal cases subsequently open access to the most secret places, starting the moment the deed is revealed. Cooperative culprits looking for redemption, variety, or forgiveness, vengeful family members, and elaborate court records have taken writers

far into hidden inner worlds -- after the fact.

Nonfiction writers are fated to arrive late. Something that a literary journalist can only do in the first person, with hindsight, after chance has subjected him to bad or good fortune, is to write about a person about to be mugged, slip on a banana peel, or find a pot of gold. Once in a while, something untoward happens to a writer, and readers may profit from the author's misfortune -- Francis Steegmuller's "The Incident at Naples" (which ran in *The New Yorker* in 1986) comes to mind. Steegmuller describes being robbed and injured while on holiday. Perhaps it is to push this limit that writers go adventuring -- sailing into nasty seas and living to tell, hunting in the green hills of Africa and bagging the limit in close calls. Before disaster destroyed the lives of Christa McAuliff and the Challenger astronauts, NASA had signed up writers wishing to go space traveling. Among the applicants was Tracy Kidder, who has gone on instead to write about aging.

4. *Literary journalists write in "intimate voice," informal, frank, human, and ironic.* In literary journalism, the narrator is neither the impersonal, dutiful explainer and qualifier of academic writing, who presents research material carefully but without special consideration of readers, nor the seemingly objective and factual, judgment-suspending, orthodox informant of newswriting. The narrator of literary journalism has a personality, is a whole person, intimate, frank, ironic, wry, puzzled, judgmental, even self-mocking -- qualities academics and daily news reporters dutifully avoid as unprofessional and unobjective. They're taught to discount their personal reactions about other people and to advance no private opinions. From the perspective of the institutions or intellectual traditions sponsoring such prose, there are sound civic, commercial, scientific, and discipline-abetting reasons for curtailing the appearance of private judgment. The effect of both academic and news styles is to present readers with what appear to be *the facts*, delivered in unemotional, nonindividuated, conventionalized, and therefore presumably fair and neutral voice. Obviously, they leave lots out.

The defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person not representing, defending, or speaking on behalf of any institution, not a newspaper, corporation, government, ideology, field of study, chamber of commerce, or travel destination. It is the voice of someone naked, without bureaucratic shelter, speaking simply in his or her own right, someone who has illuminated experience with private reflection, but who has not transcended crankiness, wryness, doubtfulness, and who doesn't blank out emotional realities of sadness, glee, excitement, fury, love. The genre's power is the strength of this voice. It is an unaffiliated social force -- although its practice has been mostly benign. It is a one of the few places in media where mass audiences may consume unmoderated individual assertion, spoken on behalf of no one but the adventurous author.

The voice is rarely no-holds-barred, accusatory, or confessional, however, even though some writers -- Tom Wolfe comes to mind -- are adept at making it look that way. In most literary journalism, an informal, competent, reflective voice emerges, a voice speaking with knowledgeable assurance about topics, issues, personal subjects, a voice that reflects -- often only indirectly, as subtext -- the writer's self-knowledge, self-respect, and conscience. I suggest to my Boston University writing workshop that members find their voices by imagining they're telling fairly close friends whose wit they respect about an incident they'd observed and taken seriously, linked to fields they'd studied. What emerges is a sociable, humorously self-aware, but authoritative voice -- I hear it at dinner parties when people tell anecdotes. Reading it feels companionable.

This voice is a handy invention for essay writers, not a quirky preference, nor merely a way of

getting into the act. It is an effective tool for a difficult modern job. It enables an author to step around acculturated views of relationships and issues that are usually guarded by walls of formal language and invisible institutional alliances. The powers of the candid, intimate voice are many, and they bother people who insist on idealized versions of reality. Formality of language protects pieties, faiths, taboos, appearances, official truths. The intimate voice sidesteps such prohibitions, says things in the mode that professionals-in-the-know use when they leave work feeling pensive and confide to friends or lovers. It is the voice in which we disclose how people and institutions *really* are. It is a key characteristic of literary journalism, and is indeed something new to journalism.

A former newspaper reporter told me she'd interviewed a city traffic department official and found him stentorian and self-promoting, not sharp on issues, but a charming good-old-boy at local politics. She liked him, but she had his number. Nevertheless, her newspaper article, she recalled, had started something like, "The long-awaited design plans for a new highway exit were released today by the Office of Traffic Management." Her observations about the man, the jokes her knowing colleagues made about him in the bar near the newsroom afterwards are sorts of material a literary journalist might bring into a narrative about, say, the complex actuality of planning and building a highway exit -- along with, perhaps, material on traffic management, bureaucratic structures, urban finance, executive psychology, the politics of urban renewal, and on the meanings of driving and self-promotion and hood-old-boyhood in the writer's own life.

The audience is invited, when reading literary journalism, to adopt complex and relaxed expectations about meaning, and to share something excluded from academic and news articles -- the author's ironic vision. Irony -- the device of leading readers to consider a scene in more knowing terms than some of its actors do -- is virtually taboo in other forms of nonfiction. Two exceptions come to mind, and in both places, literary journalism turns up. The Wall Street Journal is the one major American paper that regularly runs ironic features on its front page. This may be because management there defines its audience as well-heeled, powerful, and in-the-know -- in short, as "not everyone," but an elite sector of the whole community, those on top, sharing some views of the world below. And Sunday newspaper magazines often feature a wholesome type of ironic voice, in articles whose narrators relate personal experiences with some sensitive aspect of communal morality -- prejudice, costly sickness, the burdens of aging and of mental illness. Walt Harrington's piece, essentially on the growth of interracial tolerance, both his own and our nation's, is in that spirit. As the piece illustrates, the power of irony need not emerge from sarcasm or meanness. It can bind a community, simply by expanding contexts of events beyond what the actors usually consider.

5. *Style counts, and tends to be plain and spare.* A mark of literary journalism that shows right from the start of a piece is efficient, individual, informal language. The writers here have worked their language until it is spare, stylish, and controlled. Ear may be the last teachable skill of writing. Elegant, simple expression is the goal, and what many poets and novelists reach toward, too. People discern character in part by divining who'd make those word choices. Impersonal or obdurate speakers get found out. Clean, lucid, personal language draws readers toward experiencing the immediacy of scenes, and the force of ideas.

"If you want to see the invisible world, look at the visible one," Howard Nemerov said in his enchanted essay "On Metaphor." The best language of literary journalists is also evocative, playful, sharpened by active verbs, sparing of abstract verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and the many indolent forms of "to be," taut in its grammatical linkages. Such uncluttered style is gracious -- clear and pleasant in its own right, and suited for leading readers not merely to picture, but to feel events. Readers resist clumsy writing, often without thinking much about what's wrong, but

engage with good prose, often as heedlessly. Feeling transports readers as mere logic cannot.

6. *Literary journalists write from a disengaged and mobile stance, from which they tell stories and also turn and address readers directly.* David Quammen, like the other authors here, occupies a strategic stance in relation to his material in "Strawberries Under Ice." He is the host. He entertains by telling you a good winter camping tale, immersing you in it so you feel the immediacy of it, its past, its impending future, and the ongoing "now" of it. He also guides you, his presumptive social intimate, through his evaluation of it, exiting from story to informative digressions about glaciers and his psychology, then reentering action.

Readers experience this well-spoken, worldly, witty, cagey storytelling buddy warmly, in good measure because Quammen the writer isn't trapped within the events he portrays. He describes events (that happened to Quammen the subject) from a "retrospective platform," recollecting action and considering its shape, meanings, and metaphoric echoes.

This mobile stance of the writer is another key element in literary journalism. Each author in this anthology, while telling tales, repeatedly looks directly at the reader, comments, digresses, brings in associative material, background, previous events -- not necessarily personal ones -- then reengages the story. When the author drops you back at the spot where the tale's been left off, the place feels familiar. "Oh, good," says the well-hosted reader, realizing the story is back on screen, "now I find out what happens next." The reader rejoins with enhanced perspective on the events, gained from the digressive material. The forward-moving leading edge of the narrative, from which such digressions and returns happen, may be called "the moving now" -- it's a term useful for discerning essay structure. Good storytellers often digress at moments when especially interesting action is pending, and not at the completion of action. Lucid storytelling, skillful selection of moments for pertinent digression, returning to the "moving now," are among the essential elements out of which literary journalists constructs essays.

The literary journalist's mobile stance is not quite borrowed property of novelists -- in fiction, the reader can never be sure the author has stepped away from the story, and can't quite shake the presumption that even an author's most out-of-story asides might turn out to be another layer of story. When the literary journalist digresses and then returns to narrative, the author's real-world knowledge juxtaposes with story. This mobile stance is an amazing device, full of power.

The authors in this anthology have varied approaches to this mobile stance. Jane Kramer mostly tells *about* scenes, conversing with readers, but a several refined moments fully sets scenes, drawing readers into experiencing them. Her erudition and grasp of the larger meanings of her subject infuse these moments. We see her scenes with a pleasant knowingness; we are newly sophisticated by her erudition. Tracy Kidder, on the other hand, does almost nothing but tell tales, suspending action for digressive comments to readers only occasionally. Both authors' stances aid their control of the reader's developing experience.

7. *Structure counts, mixing primary narrative with tales and digressions to amplify and reframe events.* Most literary journalism is primarily narrative, telling stories, building scenes. Each piece here carries readers along one, and often a second and third, story line. Walt Harrington's "A Family Portrait in Black & White" achronologically braids several discrete narratives that explore his relationship to racism, starting nearly currently and flashing back. He relates the events of his own interracial courtship and marriage, and also plaits in the stories of several of his wife's relatives, and the story of the relaxing of American racial attitudes.

The sequences of scenes and digressions -- some brushed past, some dwelled upon -- along with

the narrator's mobile stance relative to these tales and asides, comprise narrative structure. Literary journalists have developed a genre that permits them to sculpt stories and digression as complexly as novelists do. At any moment the reader will probably be located somewhere along the time line of at least one unfolding tale and a few developing ideas. Quammen's "Strawberries Under Ice," at first glance an example of unusually charming science writing on glaciers, is in fact a coyly constructed narrative of the purgation of his soul, and once that's well along, of his courtship and marriage, of the miracle of love and its metaphorical expression in the warming effect of ice, of paradoxical and intimate metaphors, finally of rebirth from the warmth of a snow cave. Because of Quammen's crafty structuring of these elements, the piece creeps up on you. When authors make decisions about structure -- order of scenes, points of digression, how intensively to develop which elements of stories and digressions -- they consider the effects of the order and intensities chosen on readers' experience.

8. *Literary journalists develop meaning by building upon the readers' sequential reactions.*

Readers are likely to care about how a situation came about and what happens next when they are experiencing it with the characters. Successful literary journalists never forget to be entertaining. The graver the writer's intentions, and the more earnest and crucial the message or analysis behind the story, the more readers ought to be kept engaged. Style and structure knit story and idea alluringly.

If the author does all this storytelling and digressing and industrious structure-building adroitly, readers come to feel they are heading somewhere with purpose, that the job of reading has a worthy destination. The sorts of somewheres that literary journalists reach tend to marry eternal meanings and everyday scenes. Richard Preston's "The Mountains of Pi," for instance, links the awkward daily lives of two shy Russian emigre mathematicians to their obscure intergalactic search for hints of underlying order in a chaotic universe.

Readers take journeys designed by authors to tease out the ineluctable within the everyday; the trip will go nowhere without their imaginative participation. Ultimately, what an author creates aren't sequential well-groomed paragraphs on paper, but sequential emotional, intellectual, and even moral experiences that readers undertake. These are engaging, patterned experiences, akin to the sensations of filmgoing, not textbook reading. What these pieces mean isn't on paper at all.

The writer paints sensory scenes, confides on a level of intimacy that stirs readers' own experiences and sensations, and sets up alchemical interplay between constructed text and readers' psyches. The readers' realizations are what the author and readers have made together.

Why has this union of detailed fact, narratives, and intimate voice risen so remarkably in this century?

Many traditions that defined behaviors and beliefs at the start of the century have fragmented or vaporized. In 1900 a few hundred categories described the routines of labor, and a handful of patterns defined propriety. These days, there are ten thousand sorts of jobs and of propriety. In the same period, science, which had promised answers, order, and ease, has yielded convolution, danger, and vast domains of knowledge that seem crucial to everyone but comprehensible only by specialists. And in a culture that once called upon experts, and leaders with creeds, for piloting, august authority has run aground. Presidents, priests, generals on horseback, professors in ivory towers -- none can command collective faith these days.

Yet somehow this has not resulted in universal despair. A formidable crowd of citizens wants, I'm sure with more urgency than ever, to read books and essays that comprehend what's happening in its complexity. They demand not just information, but visions of how things fit together now that the center cannot hold. A public that rarely encountered the personal imaginations of others at the turn of the century, now devours topical bestsellers, films and TV shows that cast issues narratively, and literary journalism.

Literary journalism helps sort out the new complexity. If it is not an antidote to bewilderment, at least it unites daily experiences -- including emotional ones -- with the wild plentitude of information that can be applied to experience. Literary journalism couples cold fact and personal event, in the author's humane company. And that broadens readers' scans, allows them to behold others' lives, often set within far clearer contexts than we can bring to our own. The process moves readers, and writers, toward realization, compassion, and in the best of cases, wisdom.

I'll even claim that there is something intrinsically political -- and strongly democratic -- about literary journalism, something pluralistic, pro-individual, anti-cant, and anti-elite. That seems inherent in the common practices of the form. Informal style cuts through the obfuscating generalities of creeds, countries, companies, bureaucracies, and experts. And narratives of the felt lives of everyday people test idealizations against actualities. Truth is in the details of real lives.

In *Literary Journalism*, editors Norman Sims and Mark Kramer have collected the finest examples of literary journalism from both the masters of the genre who have been working for decades and the new voices freshly arrived on the national scene. The fifteen essays gathered here include: -- John McPhee's account of the battle between army engineers and the lower Mississippi River -- Susan Orlean's brilliant portrait of the private, imaginative world of a ten-year-old boy -- Tracy Kidder's moving description of life in a nursing home -- Ted Conover's wild journey in an African