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A metaphor for the world: William Langewiesche, John Vaillant and looking for the story in long-form

B. Reynolds*

*Ryerson University, Canada

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This is a study of two writers and their methods, with a discussion of what makes their superior magazine features so compelling. In long-form narrative, the story is never simply about the story—it is a metaphor for something much larger. The three-part series, “Unbuilding the World Trade Center” (2002 *The Atlantic Monthly*), is straightforward. In the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on Manhattan, a group of men remove debris from the former World Trade Center site. But it is really about how a democratic society forms out of the ruins, with Langewiesche’s story mirroring America’s shifting global stature. John Vaillant’s *The Golden Spruce* (2005) is a profile of an eco-radical who cut down a one-in-a-billion giant Sitka spruce to protest against a logging company’s clear-cut practices in British Columbia. Yet it is really a story about how, when it comes to humanity’s relationship with the planet, we cannot see the forest for the trees. For authors of long-form, discovering what the story is really about is the key to compelling long-form narratives.

In long-form narrative, the story is rarely simply about the story—it is usually a metaphor for something much larger. While it is true that the best magazine pieces focus tightly on a theme, or in some cases multiple themes, there is always something else underneath the story. The construction of that additional layer underneath the main story is the main focus of this study of two writers and their methods. Along the way I also hope to identify what makes these superior magazine features so compelling. In both cases examined—William Langewiesche’s 75,000-word magazine serial, “American Ground,” issued over three consecutive issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*, then published in book form; and John Vaillant’s “The Golden Bough,” originally published in *The New Yorker*, then expanded to book length as *The Golden Spruce*—the writers discovered, first in the field and then in front of the computer screen sculpting words from the raw material of fact, the true significance and meaning of their stories. They never claimed to know immediately what the story was about; they only knew going in, and their editors knew going in, there had to be a story. As they searched for clues and assessed what they had found, the story began to reveal itself. It is only during this creative, artistic part of the process—the “Just what are we looking at here?” part, or the literary journalism part rather than the reporting and researching part—when their stories come to provide a worldview. For Langewiesche, his stories almost invariably become metaphors for America’s place in the world; for Vaillant, his stories tend to be metaphors for flawed human nature.

What kind of writing is this, anyway?

The New Journalism, parajournalism, narrative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction, literary journalism, narrative journalism, intimate journalism, the New New Journalism, or just plain narrative—the elusiveness of its definition is the first problem of long-form, a type of writing practiced predominantly in the United States and to a lesser degree in other countries. Its history is illustrious, yet remains contentious. Novelist Tom Wolfe, who at one time was a celebrated practitioner of nonfiction, wrote a famous essay called “The New Journalism” (Wolfe and Johnson 1973: 3-52) that introduced a book collecting a number of excellent magazine pieces. Wolfe formulated a theory about what was happening around him, including to him, in the genre.

It is not very often that one comes across a new style, period. And if a new style were created not via the novel, or the short story, or poetry, but via journalism—I suppose that would seem extraordinary. It was probably that idea—more than any specific devices, such as using scenes and dialogue in “novelistic” fashion—that began to give me very grand ideas about a new journalism. As I saw it, if a new literary style could originate in journalism, then it stood to reason that journalism could aspire to more than mere emulation of those aging giants, the novelists. (Wolfe 1973: 22)

What did this new style contain? For Wolfe, it had at least four sacrosanct attributes. First, the writer had to propel the story employing scenes or descriptions of events so vivid the reader would be swept up in the narrative arc as if watching a film, the pages themselves fading out, then back in again, signaling changes in the story. Second, the writer had to use dialogue—the shortest, clearest way to convey action and character—wherever possible. Third, the writer had to utilize what Wolfe called “point of view,” or, essentially, putting the reader inside the heads of characters.

Lastly, a good nonfiction story was made better by piling on a tremendous amount of detail. What a person wore, how she acted, whether she smoked. Was she wearing blue jeans or black? Designer brand or plain old Levi's? Was it an Audrey Hepburn-style white blouse or a ratty Led Zeppelin T-shirt? What kind of cigarette did she smoke? Did she put her lips over the perforations on the Lite cigarette? If a character was described as a teenage girl who wore ripped jeans and puffed frenetically, you had an excellent chance of conveying her socioeconomic plight in a couple of sentences.

Wolfe's theories held up fairly well, although certain commentators like Dwight Macdonald (Weber 1974: 223-33), criticized the self-indulgent style of certain long-form writers—Wolfe himself, for one—in the 1960s and 1970s. The techniques were not new, of course—everyone from Daniel Defoe to Charles Dickens had employed them in one form or another in both fiction and nonfiction writing.

A decade later, Norman Sims compiled a collection of magazine articles and wrote an introduction, "The Literary Journalists" (Sims 1984: 3-25), à la Wolfe. In his discussion of where the New Journalism had gone since it was declared by Wolfe to be the new thing, Sims decided "Literary Journalism" was a more appropriate moniker. Sims then wrote an introduction, "The Art of Literary Journalism" (Sims and Kramer 1995: 1-19) to another collection of magazine writing, co-edited by Mark Kramer. He took stock of the techniques adopted by long-form writing over the previous two decades and outlined other concepts and devices, beyond Wolfe, he believed literary journalists were now employing in abundance.

In 1984 *The Literary Journalists* broadened the set of characteristics to include immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation. Writers I've spoken with more recently have wanted to add to the list a personal involvement with their materials, and an artistic creativity not often associated with nonfiction. An innovative genre that is still developing, literary journalism resists narrow definitions. (Sims and Kramer 1995: 9)

Sims recalled a conversation with the writer Richard Rhodes, author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. Rhodes talked to Sims about what Sims termed "symbolic realities." Sims quoted Rhodes as saying, "That's been terribly important to me. The transcendentalist business of the universe showing forth, the sense that there are deep structures behind information, has been central to everything I've done in writing." (Sims and Kramer 1995: 22) Sims's symbolic reality might as well be code for metaphor.

Goodbye Twentieth Century, Hello Nineteenth

John Hartsock has argued that, rather than springing from the wild subjectivities of the New Journalism's most florid stylistic exponents (Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson), long-form writing actually has had a much lengthier history, dating back to the nineteenth century. Techniques of long-form had been developing into a style Lincoln Steffens, city editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, called "literary journalism" as far back as the 1890s.

Looking for the story in long-form

Steffens ... was advocating a narrative literary journalism and in doing so reflected a critical consciousness of this form caught somewhere between literature and journalism. That critical consciousness is one of several factors that help to locate the origins of modern American literary journalism, narrative in nature, as having come of age by the 1890s. (Hartsock 2000: 21)

Over time, long-form magazine writing has gained heft as a literary form, not so easily dismissed as a freewheeling offshoot of more serious journalism, or as just another side effect of the cultural experimentation of the 1960s zeitgeist. Robert Boynton has argued that today's magazine writers have taken immersion research so seriously they have returned to the principles of late nineteenth century long-form.

In the years since Wolfe's manifesto, a group of writers has been quietly securing a place at the very center of contemporary American literature for reportorially based, narrative-driven, long-form nonfiction. These New New Journalists ... use the license to experiment with form earned by the New Journalists of the 1960s and '70s to speak to social and political concerns similar to those of 19th-century writers like Stephen Crane, Jacob A. Riis, and Lincoln Steffens (an earlier generation of New Journalists), synthesizing the best of the two traditions. (Boynton 2005a)

Further, Boynton decided that the new generation of long-form writers concentrates on the mundane rather than the world of the powerful and famous.

If Wolfe's outlandish scenarios and larger-than-life characters leap from the page, the New New Journalism goes in the opposite direction, drilling into the bedrock of ordinary experience, exploring what Gay Talese calls "the fictional current that flows beneath the stream of reality." In this regard, writers such as John McPhee and Talese—prose poets of the quotidian—are its key figures in the prior generation. In Talese's quest to turn reporting on the ordinary into an art, we find an aspect of the New Journalism enterprise that Wolfe obscured in his manifesto. Both McPhee and Talese emphasize the importance of rigorous reporting on the events and characters of everyday life over turns of bravura in writing style. Reporting on the minutiae of the ordinary—often over a period of years—has become their signature method." (Boynton 2005: xv)

While there is general agreement with Hartsock and Boynton over long-form's provenance, there is room for debate over the emphasis on extraordinary representations of the ordinary, which downplays the scope and breadth of the long-form writer's project. The signature method of immersion reporting—long stretches of time spent with the subject, or doing what the subject does in order to understand it better; in a sense, becoming the subject—can either change the thesis, or, better, unveil the main theme. Emphasizing the excavation of ordinary experience calls into question how exactly to interpret 'ordinary,' which Merriam Webster defines as "the regular or customary condition or course of things," and Oxford as "regular, normal, customary, usual."

Does saturation reporting on a group of engineers coordinating an efficient, yet humane effort to remove the World Trade Center debris count as "drilling through the bedrock of ordinary experience," or is it the story of ordinary people reacting to an extraordinary situation? Hanging out with engineers for five months at Ground Zero

seems to heed Boynton's call to unveil the reality in the prosaic, but the event that triggered Langewiesche's decision to immerse himself in their lives was anything but ordinary. Similarly, would taking a chainsaw to a one-in-a-billion tree on an island in the Pacific Northwest count as an ordinary experience or an extraordinary experience? Most loggers are ordinary people doing their jobs, and most of the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands are ordinary people living on their land, but surely the effect the perpetrator, Grant Hadwin, had on them was extraordinary.

Searching For A Theme

In both Langewiesche's *American Ground* and Vaillant's *The Golden Spruce*, we start with simple stories, at least on the surface. What is *American Ground* about? One sentence: Two very large buildings collapse and a cluster of men spend several months on the cleanup. But these are not just any buildings; they are the two largest skyscrapers in Manhattan, ones that some deride as modern towers of Babel. Plus, they did not simply fall down—terrorists flew hijacked airplanes into both buildings. Gas from the planes and paperwork from the offices turned the nexus of international commerce into an unstoppable inferno.

Now it becomes not simply a bunch of guys cleaning up a mess but rather the reaction in the aftermath to an emotion-laden, politically motivated act inspired by a warped reading of a certain religion. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, the governor of New York, the mayor of New York City, the Port Authority Police Department, the New York Police Department, the Fire Department of New York all get involved. And over in the borough of Queens, a little-known branch of the city government called the Department of Design and Construction (DDC) gets involved. Langewiesche gains access to the site through the DDC. He remains there for five months. He decides to write his story from the point of view of the engineers, but he has other stories to tell. He has the views of the Port Authority workers, some of whom are engineers. He has the stories of the firemen, whose collective grief over their fallen brethren seems to dwarf all other concerns. He has the stories of the two men in charge of the DDC, Kenneth Holden and Michael Burton. In short, the story is populated with planes, buildings and people—including firemen, engineers, police officers and bureaucrats.

At some point, Langewiesche has to make a decision as to how to tell this deceptively simple story that suddenly becomes maddeningly complex. He divides the research into three parts. The first starts with a technical description of the buildings coming down. A few characters are introduced. The second part begins with a description of the hijacked planes from takeoff to impact, performing what the writer calls a "strange aerial ballet." (Langewiesche 2002: 76) More characters are introduced. The third section, finally, begins with people, or tribes of people actually, and focuses on the at-times open conflict between construction company personnel, firemen and police officers, especially over the perception that the firemen harbor an attitude that their fallen comrades are worth more than police officers or civilians.

Vaillant's story is equally simple—at first. A man illegally chops down a tree and many stakeholders become upset. Grant Hadwin swims across a just-above-freezing Yakoun River, in the Queen Charlotte Islands, in the middle of a January night, with a chainsaw attached to his belt. He makes strategic cuts to the base of the golden

spruce. The tree survives until a couple of days later, when a major wind gust blows it over. The former tree surveyor at one time plotted logging routes through mountains in advance of clear-cutting, but eventually concluded that what he was doing—what forestry companies were doing—was shortsighted. He underwent an epiphany deep in the woods, and became possessed by a vision that bequeathed to him a devastating critique of forestry as well as an unhinged need to blame “university trained professionals” for destroying the forests.

The golden spruce was a fifty-metre tall tree standing on the bank of the Yakoun. Its height was not unusual for old growth forest, but its colour was astonishing. The tree could not produce enough chlorophyll and its outer needles turned golden instead of green. According to Haida mythology, the tree was a boy that had been transformed into a tree. It may have been sacred to the Haida, but it had also become something of a tourist attraction. MacMillan Bloedel, which owned the logging rights to the old-growth forest around the golden spruce at the time, allowed it to remain standing as most of its fellow giants were harvested.

In Vaillant’s story there are numerous themes. There is Hadwin’s uneasy relationship to his profession, at which he excels. There is the Haida perspective on the golden spruce, which Hadwin had not considered before he committed his crime. There is the history of the Haida people and their warrior past—they could be as ruthless as any captain sent by the English crown with a mandate to return with riches. There is the history of logging in British Columbia, which in turn harkens back to the origins of European colonization of the New World and aggressive resource exploitation. There is the tree itself and the botany required to produce a gorgeous freak of nature. The man, the tree, the tribe and the loggers—four themes, not one.

In both stories, the main character that glues the story together is an amorphous thing. In Langewiesche’s story, it is the construction sight. He explains:

It was a difficult thing to write about because it was a construction site, for Christ’s sake—especially if you don’t want to wallow in the heroism thing, which might last a page or two and then you’d run out of things to say. How do you write about a place where the real story has to do with diesel equipment? It was a challenge. And writing about engineers, who are famously inarticulate. (Langewiesche 2002a)

In Vaillant’s narrative, it is the forest itself. He states, “It’s so counter-intuitive, because you think of the forest as this static place. There is a lot going on there, but we just see the trees standing there. That was the supreme challenge, to find the drama in the forest. I knew it was there.” (Vaillant 2005a) He likened the struggle to find the story in the trees to examining a crystal from various angles, thereby exposing both its beauty and its faults. “With the tree, I ‘pentagulated,’ or ‘octangulated’—biologically, mythologically, socially, environmental, politically, all these different aspects of it.” (Vaillant 2005a)

Looking Down, Looking Through

To understand how Langewiesche and Vaillant came to decide what their stories were really about, it is necessary to look back at their training and how it informed

their methodologies. Langewiesche came to long-form writing fairly late in life, around age thirty-five, after a successful career in commercial cargo flying. He was no stranger to the sky, having taken his first solo flight at age fourteen. His father, Wolfgang Langewiesche, wrote *Stick and Rudder* (1944), a widely acknowledged classic about the mechanics of flying. The younger Langewiesche also wrote a book on flying, *Inside the Sky*, largely (but not entirely) based on a series of articles written for *The Atlantic Monthly*. At the beginning of *Inside the Sky*, he spells out exactly how a life of flying has transformed his worldview:

The aerial view is something entirely new. We need to admit that it flattens the world and mutes it in a rush of air and engines, and it suppresses beauty. But it also strips the façades from our constructions, and by raising us above the constraints of the treeline and the highway it imposes a brutal honesty on our perceptions. It lets us see ourselves in context, as creatures struggling through life on the face of the planet, not separate from nature, but its most expressive agents. It lets us see that these patterns repeat to an extent which before we had not known, and that there is a sense to them. (Langewiesche 1999: 2)

Langewiesche's academic background plays a role, too. He casts an anthropologist's eye over his story terrain, sizing up people and their motivations quickly. He has been in war zones on assignment for the *Atlantic*, and has been surrounded by death, so wandering around in a fallen building, as he does at Ground Zero with some engineers, is not an overwhelming experience.

The risks are largely political, but they become physical. I've certainly taken much greater risks for the magazine than doing a little diddling around underground in the World Trade Center. I've been out in Sahara Desert for the *Atlantic*, and had some very rough stuff happen to me. I've been arrested multiple times for the magazine, and detained by people who have accused me of all kinds of things. That's much scarier and lonelier than what I was doing at the World Trade Center. (Langewiesche 2002a)

The *Atlantic's* managing editor, Cullen Murphy, telephoned Langewiesche the morning of the attacks, and the two men tried to determine the best story angle for their magazine. After initially thinking of heading to Afghanistan, they decided instead to try for Ground Zero access. They were lucky, as the man in charge of the DDC, Holden, was an avid reader of the *Atlantic*, and of Langewiesche's "crystalline prose," as Murphy has called it, in particular. Holden granted Langewiesche full, unrestricted access to the site. There was an obvious story angle—how to remove such an enormous pile of debris—of the type perfected by John McPhee, the man Boynton identifies as being one of the mentors of the New New Journalism. McPhee pioneered the "process," or how-to, piece. In this case, the process to be explained is how do you remove "200,000 tons of structural steel" (Langewiesche 2002: 204) from a densely populated urban area, while respecting the raw emotions of the bereaved?

The story had a readymade chronological narrative structure, with the attacks at the beginning and a ceremony nine months later acting as natural bookends. But still, Langewiesche needed to find the story within these generous parameters. His background in flying aircraft—the ability to survey the landscape and look at the world as if from above—helped him a great deal. He trusted his empirical instinct:

“I’m not smart enough to stare at my navel and write. I have to go out into the world.” (Langewiesche 2003)

If Langewiesche refuses to look within, he is not necessarily against allowing the writer—the “I” of the story—to intrude on the narrative. He says he allows himself the luxury of using first person “freely”—freedom in the sense of choosing when he wants to, not in terms of frequency of use. “When it comes out it’s a natural thing.” This is one of the fundamental differences between the New Journalism and the long-form writing that is being produced now. During the era of Wolfe and Thompson the “I” was self-consciously brought into play much more often and prominently. At times, it made for much funnier stories, but its self-indulgence can seem quaint and ridiculous now. “What’s going on now is a new form of clean classicism,” Langewiesche observes. “It’s equally as deep.” (Langewiesche 2003)

Vaillant’s life trajectory is not dissimilar. His educational background is in English, but after finishing his degree, instead of applying for an internship at a New York magazine as his classmates did, he wanted to engage in the physical world.

To me, the idea of having to put on a necktie and sitting in some cubicle just sounded like premature suicide. So I hitchhiked to Alaska, where an English degree was actually a handicap. I didn’t know how to do anything that was important to people there. I was twenty-two. It was a great place to learn about the mechanical, physical world, and it certainly influenced my writing. (Vaillant 2005a)

If anything, Vaillant’s formative experience taught him that, in long-form writing at least, being comfortable in one’s body, feeling confident as one moves through the world, and being able to handle oneself in a variety of situations—hanging out with loggers deep in the forest—counts in the drive to form a narrative.

Loggers could take me wherever they want. “Here, put on these weird, spiked shoes you’ve never worn before.” I’m going where you’re walking along fallen trees but they’re thirty feet off the ground, with boulders and scree and broken branches down below you. They’re not slowing down for you. The guys said a couple of times, “Wow, you seem to move pretty comfortably in here.” It’s a rarefied, weird little domain. When that becomes a non-issue you have this access, in your own mind almost, because you don’t have to worry about where you’re going or what’s going to happen to you or whether you can handle this. (Vaillant 2005a)

For Vaillant, part of long-form writing is the need to understand what motivates people, and that requires winning their trust. The kinds of stories he tells emphasize not only travel and movement through space, but also “getting low to the ground with whoever the subject is, or whatever the topic is, and meeting it where it is.” (Vaillant 2005a) He also believes in gathering empirical evidence to buttress his storytelling. What is going on out there in the real world counts, not what the writer thinks is going on out there.

What The Story Is Really About

At a certain point in the immersion process, something clicks. A eureka moment occurs, and the writer understands the depth of his story. At this stage, he declares: It is really about something else. In Langewiesche's case, it happened five weeks after the twin towers fell. He began to see the unfolding drama as a positive story in the midst of so much misery.

It was obvious to me that we were looking at much, much more. That view came from being on the inside; it was not an external view at all. We didn't reason that out. We lucked into it and then were alert enough to realize that what was going on was a radical thing. An amazing experiment was happening before our very eyes. I was telling Cullen [Murphy] on the phone, 'Jesus Christ, Cullen, this is amazing what's going on here,' and I gave him certain examples of what I meant by that—the blank slate aspect to the chaos. So he came down and we met, late night, at the Bryant Park Café, for several hours and talked through what was happening. And we began to talk about the possibility of doing something very, very long. (Langewiesche 2002a)

Langewiesche realized he had many conceptual elements with which to work—America's place in the world, New York's hothouse environment, large buildings falling down, and the exploitation of patriotism, fear and tragedy. "You've got all this debris," he says, "you've got to get it out of the most neurotic, built-up city around." (Langewiesche 2002a) The most compelling facet was that it displayed the core of who Americans were, and what America was, at that moment in history. The writer was concerned with not only the removal of debris and remains, but also how people reacted. Ultimately, the story was positive—that despite the confusion, pilfering and tribal rivalries, this group had rediscovered an exhilarating kind of freedom. Buried underneath a mountain of man-made junk was the will to create a new world. Telling this story exposed "to us (the observer, the writer, and then the reader) who we are. Everything I do is basically a metaphor anyway. They're always metaphors for something else." (Langewiesche 2002a)

A couple of years later, upon further reflection, Langewiesche modified this view. He decided he had been too absorbed in the tiny world of Ground Zero during those months of intense, on-site reporting to pay much attention to the George W. Bush administration's exploitation of patriotism and 9/11 for its own ends. "If anything, it's too much that way. I was sitting in this little nest of organic, really admirable reactions, ranging from Giuliani, the construction guys, the engineers, guys like Holden. It was unbelievable, it was courageous, it was creative, it was all kinds of things." (Langewiesche 2004a)

For Vaillant, the real story also came into focus in the field, while listening to a logger explain the brute ontological fact of his trade.

Earl Einarson, a fifty-four-year-old tree faller, expressed the logger's conundrum as honestly as anyone. 'I love this job,' he explained, gesturing toward the wild chaos of the old-growth forest he was in the process of leveling. ... 'Another reason I like falling,' he said, 'is I like walking around in old-growth forests. It's kind of an oxymoron [sic], I guess—to like something and then go out and kill it.' (2005: 219-20)

Looking for the story in long-form

For the writer, it is difficult to anticipate when this gift will arrive. Dozens of pertinent sources might have been chased before the one that puts it together arrives. Even then, it may not become apparent immediately.

You might say, well, I want to see some old growth getting felled—that's about as specific as it gets, so you just go and see what happens. People say some extraordinary things. The guy who's been logging for thirty years, who quit in the middle of high school, was being so frank. Here is the human dilemma right there—that's it! But I had to go into the bush to get it. To be standing there, the sawdust perfume in our nostrils and these huge carcasses lying all over the place and the saw rumbling away and that's where it happened. It was a jewel of a quote and it was so unguarded and real. That's the pivotal moment in the book—that's the point of the book. (Vaillant 2005a)

Even then Vaillant was not sure, although he did have the presence of mind to record the felling of an old growth tree and time the cut. One man can bring down a tree that is five hundred years old, two hundred feet in height and ten feet in diameter in ten minutes. Once he sat down to organize his research it became clear what was at stake—the world as we know it.

Langeweische's story is a sprawling, three-part series, each part roughly 25,000 words. But sprinkled throughout his story, the main theme is slowly, steadily reinforced. He uses the words "pioneering" and "improvising" many times. Early on, he surmises, "[T]he disaster was smothered in an exuberant and distinctly American embrace." (Langeweische 2003: 8) Three pages later, he gives the reader something close to a theme:

Their success in the midst of chaos was an odd twist in the story of these monolithic buildings that in the final stretch of the twentieth century had stood so visibly for the totalitarian ideals of planning and control. But the buildings were not buildings anymore, and the place where they fell had become a blank slate for the United States. Among the ruins now, an unscripted experiment in American life had gotten under way. (Langeweische 2003: 11)

To reiterate the positive spin on the tragedy, six pages later he declares that the attacks and the ensuing cleanup did not lead to a "grand 'loss of innocence' proclaimed that fall in the press but ... a period of creative turbulence" (Langeweische 2003: 17) In this world unto itself, everyone subscribed to a new "social contract," which had unconsciously reared itself. "All that counted about anyone was what that person could provide now." (Langeweische 2003: 113). Finally, the writer reinforces his earlier pronouncement about the country's true nature: "America does not function as a dictatorship of rationalists." (Langeweische 2003: 170)

In Vaillant's original *New Yorker* manuscript, "The Golden Bough," he concentrated on one thematic pole, Hadwin, the man who cut down the golden spruce. His three other themes—the tree, the Haida and forestry practices are submerged. Given the chance to extend his work to book length, Vaillant expands the section on the history of forestry, especially in the New World, particularly British Columbia, honing in on the Queen Charlotte Islands. He elaborates on the known scientific knowledge of the unusual tree. He enriches the story with extensive passages about the Haida—their

demeanour in their heyday (warlike, dominant), and how they competed in a cut-throat race to the bottom with English traders to harvest the otter to extinction. In this section on the history of the Haida, Vaillant's metaphor reveals itself.

For well over a hundred years, there has been a strong tendency throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere to idealize Native Americans; this extends, in many cases, to the Natives themselves. They are often depicted as proto-environmentalists—stewards of a continental Eden who revered their prey and nurtured the land until it was laid waste by invading Europeans. ... And yet, before the westward expansion, before any of these romantics was yet born, the West Coast otter trade was helping to set the tone for every extractive industry that has come after. ... [D]espite its practical importance, and despite a necessarily keen sensitivity to the rhythms of the natural world, the West Coast natives pursued this creature to the brink of extinction. In doing so, they demonstrated the same kind of profit-driven shortsightedness that has wiped out dozens of other species, including the Atlantic salmon and, more recently, the Atlantic cod. It is an eccentric and uniquely human approach to resources: like plowing under your farmland to make way for more lawns, or compromising your air quality in exchange for an enormous car. (Vaillant: 2005: 72)

Vaillant's grand theme—the suspicion that there might be a self-destructive genetic tick in human beings—beyond Hadwin, beyond the golden spruce, beyond the Haida, beyond forestry itself, starts to ring loud and clear: “[O]nce the market for skins had been created, [the Natives] really had no choice but to participate.... Once aboard a juggernaut like this, it appears suicidal to jump off—even if staying on is sure to destroy you in the end.” (Vaillant 2005: 77) The astonishing collective outpouring of grief from the various stakeholders over the loss of the one and only golden spruce seemed only to reinforce the disturbed Hadwin's point of contention about what he derided as the logging company's “pet”: “[P]eople fail to see the forest for the tree.” (Vaillant 2005: 139)

Technique And Soul

At root, *The Golden Spruce* and *American Ground* are simple stories told in rich, varied and complex ways by their respective authors. Langewiesche says it is through his storytelling that he “confronts the world.” (Langewiesche 2002a) And Vaillant had not realized his stories had a common theme until someone asked him directly what he liked to write about. He answered, “That collision between human beings and their environment. Most of my stories are about people interacting with nature in these ingenious but far-out ways. There is often hubris at the end of it.” (Vaillant 2005a)

The best long-form stories employ the celebrated techniques of the New Journalism—scenes, details, point of view, dialogue. They also employ the kind of immersion reporting that has been around since “literary journalism” was coined in the late nineteenth century, and since “process” writing was refined in the late twentieth century. Barbara Lounsberry and Gay Talese have told us the nonfiction writer's goal is to enhance the reader's knowledge of the world. “This desire to expand the public's understanding—to bring forward the unnoticed from the shadows

of neglect, or to offer visionary portraits of well-known persons and events—has propelled nonfiction writers throughout history.” (Lounsberry and Talese 1996: 30) And Walt Harrington has declared: “Always remember: Scene, detail and narrative bring story to life, while theme and meaning imbue it with a soul.” (Harrington 1997: xxi)

Exactly so, but these techniques must be placed at the service of finding out what the story is really about. And, invariably, the most memorable stories are the ones that are really about something else—something that is generated from the writer’s sifting of the research. No matter what you want to call it—theme, symbolic reality, metaphor—this is what motivates long-form writers to produce their best work.

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Bill Reynolds is head of the magazine division at the School of Journalism, Ryerson University, where he teaches long-form writing. He is secretary/treasurer of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies. Before Ryerson, Bill spent a decade as editor of *Eye Weekly*, the Toronto alternative newspaper.