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Teaching literary journalism: Intentional meandering in the literary journalism classroom

Abstract

What makes the literary journalism classroom a particularly creative one is the permission to experiment. It is an opportunity towards the end of a degree program to rethink core ideas about journalism, core ideas about writing, core ideas about ethics and core ideas about how to bring all these ideas into alignment. This is the unique pedagogical value of literary journalism. It is one of the few areas of journalism that takes both the world and the personal immensely seriously. The symbolic and the factual, emotion and observation, the tangible and the intangible all jut up against one another. So it becomes one of the few opportunities within the journalism curriculum where the deeply personal – who am I and how do I express what is unique and important to me – is given space.

Intentional meandering in the literary journalism classroom

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ABSTRACT: What makes the literary journalism classroom a particularly creative one is the permission to experiment. It is an opportunity towards the end of a degree program to rethink core ideas about journalism, core ideas about writing, core ideas about ethics and core ideas about how to bring all these ideas into alignment. This is the unique pedagogical value of literary journalism. It is one of the few areas of journalism that takes both the world and the personal immensely seriously. The symbolic and the factual, emotion and observation, the tangible and the intangible all jut up against one another. So it becomes one of the few opportunities within the journalism curriculum where the deeply personal – who am I and how do I express what is unique and important to me – is given space.

I have taught classes in Literary Journalism since 2008 and although the classes have varied from year to year – I have changed both the texts and the approach a number of times – often I get the comment: “Thanks so much for this subject, it’s one of the best I’ve ever done.”

I don’t take this as a tribute to my particular teaching style – although I try to make the classes as diverse, interesting and interactive as possible – it seems to reflect something about the subject itself.

As a final year elective, my students are primed in both positive and negative ways for a subject like literary journalism. They have undergone pretty rigorous training in coming up with story ideas, and writing and producing all kinds of journalism to deadline. So they are starting to feel at home with the craft. But they also come with a set of parameters that we teach them: journalism is a balanced investigation of facts, keep yourself out of the story, include both sides of the story, include multiple authoritative sources. They have a lot of other people’s voices in their head every time they sit down to write.

So I usually begin the first class by saying that this subject will be particularly challenging because they will have to draw on all of the skills they have accumulated so far yet they will have to put to one side many of the common assumptions they have been taught about what makes ‘good’ journalism.

Strangely, it’s the multimedia subjects we teach, where students produce three minute slideshows that combine evocative images and layered audio, that provide the best training for the production of literary journalism. In these pieces students have to find an emotional center for their story and they have to think about the combination of different story layers, the way it builds through juxtaposition and accumulation rather than through a chronology of fact.

I often think of literary journalism as the “journalism of moments”. Think of the way John Hersey keeps coming back to markers of time and space as he narrates those crucial moments after Hiroshima’s devastating “noiseless flash”. Think of the way Helen Garner’s recent *In the House of Grief* returns again and again to ponder that critical moment when a father drove with

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his three sons off a bridge. Or think of the multiple juxtaposed moments – the micro stories – accumulated over nine years that Rebecca Solnit assembles in *Savage Grace*, her exploration of the Nevada Test Site and Yosemite National Park.

So it's not surprising that a three-minute multimedia piece – work that focuses on the intensity of moments – provides a fitting introduction to literary journalism.

I walk around the classroom a lot when I'm teaching, and walking, meandering, moving from moment to moment is a good metaphor for both writing and teaching literary journalism. One of the first things I try to teach in literary journalism is the importance of meandering.

Rebecca Solnit has talked about walking as a metaphor for her work. In an interview (Cohen, 2009) she was asked to characterise her approach to writing and she referred to a passage in her book *Wanderlust: a history of walking*:

This history of walking is an amateur history, just as walking is an amateur act. To use a walking metaphor, it trespasses through everybody else's field – through anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature, sexuality, religious studies – and doesn't stop in any of them on its long route. For if a field of expertise can be imagined as a real field – a nice rectangular confine carefully tilled and yielding a specific crop – then the subject of walking resembles walking itself in its lack of confines. (Solnit 2000: 4)

Then she added:

I have a very clear sense of what I am here to do and what its internal coherence is, but it doesn't fit into the way that ideas and continuities are chopped up into fields or labeled. (Cohen, 2009)

As I have pointed out in a recent article about her literary journalism (O'Donnell 2014) Solnit found her unique voice by meandering across those boundaries. In her history of walking, she goes on to describe walking as “the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals ... Walking, ideally is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned.”

It is at this intersection between intentionality and meandering that we see a crucial element of what gives the experience of both reading and writing literary journalism its appeal. It is the posture of discovery.

What makes the literary journalism classroom a particularly creative one is the permission to experiment. It is an opportunity towards the end of a degree program to rethink core ideas about journalism, core ideas about writing, core ideas about ethics and core ideas about how to bring all these ideas into alignment.

This is done in the context of one large project: a 4000 word long-form piece about a topic of choice. For many students at the beginning of semester this seems like a daunting task but by the end of the semester it has become one through which they can focus their goals and ambition.

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In most of our journalism subjects students have a lot of choice: they pitch their own topics for most assignments, they explore a variety of media and forms. By-and-large I think this produces better work because students devote themselves to something in which they are interested. But it doesn't mean that we don't get plenty of mediocre assignments.

In literary journalism both the standard of work and the standard of apparent effort is consistently higher. I think this is because in this subject students have the freedom not just to choose their own topic, but the form challenges them to choose a topic that is "large" enough to fit the long-form medium and they are given a lot of freedom to experiment with approach and structure. So it is the twin motivation of challenge and freedom – intentionality and meandering – that creates a unique buttressing structure for their work.

David Abrahamson (2006) has observed that in his experience of teaching literary journalism classroom discussion often focuses on the "why" as well as, if not more so, than the "how":

Students want to explore where literary journalism fits in with the more conventional practices of the profession. They want to discuss the motivation and career paths of past practitioners. They are looking, I think, for reasons to attempt something which most of them find difficult, perhaps even scary. (432)

He goes on to add that it also produces work that is deeply personal, even if it doesn't involve the first person.

I would agree with these observations, I would say that in confronting these projects that have a large word count and a weighty theme students are also confronting not just what they can do technically – how they can control the burgeoning story to make it interpretable and manipulate structure to effect – but also who they are as storytellers and what this means professionally and personally.

This is the unique pedagogical value of literary journalism. It is one of the few areas of journalism that takes both the world and the personal immensely seriously. The symbolic and the factual, emotion and observation, the tangible and the intangible all jut up against one another. So it becomes one of the few opportunities within the journalism curriculum where the deeply personal – who am I and how do I express what is unique and important to me – is given space. Left open ended that 'who am I' question is unanswerable, but jugged up against the task, the challenge to engage with and report something "large," many students unexpectedly find that largeness in themselves. Importantly they find that critical intersection between themselves and a world they care about.

As Solnit said about walking: "Walking, ideally is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned." Similarly, it seems to me that in literary journalism students often come to that important experience where their story, their values and their emerging sense of themselves as a journalist or storyteller are aligned. They find their voice.

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