

*Tears in the Darkness . . .*

## Writing Narrative Portraiture

by Michael Norman  
New York University, U.S.A.

*The answer to figuring out the dramatic structure of Tears in the Darkness was to weave narrative portraiture through the sprawling narrative.*

I began my writing life as a nascent poet, an undergraduate veteran who had returned from the battlefield and embraced verse as an emollient for a scorched soul. One day one of my professors told me that if I wanted to be a “real artist,” I needed a “critical doctrine.” I didn’t know any better, so I started reading my way down his reading list until I found T.S. Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot’s poetry had appealed to me; I didn’t get his allusions at first, but his belief in the idea of renewal seemed to take the ache out of my chest, so I decided to make his doctrine my doctrine: The writer, he said, “must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past . . . . He must be aware that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.”

I went on to become a commercial writer, which is to say, a journalist, a profession in which deadlines always trump doctrines. Then I left the business for the academy and started writing long-form or “literary” journalism. Looking around for narrative models, I remembered Eliot’s advice: no writer “has his complete meaning alone.” I didn’t have to reinvent the past; all I had to do was try to build on it.

Ten years ago I teamed up with my wife, Elizabeth Norman, to tell the story of America’s worst military defeat and its aftermath: the 1942 battle for the Bataan peninsula in the Philippines, the infamous “Death March” that followed and the three-year gauntlet of prison camps, “hell ships” and slave labor pens that formed its aftermath. Beth had just finished *We Band of Angels, The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese* for Random House. I had helped with the line edits and became fascinated with the larger story of the lost battle, the brutal death march and the cauldron of cruelty in which the prisoners of war were made to live for more than three years. I had written a lot about war, but was largely unsatisfied with the results. I knew war as anti-heroic, an insane enterprise in which everyone loses. Here,

at last, was a story, a set of facts and situations, that seemed to underscore that view. So I asked Beth whether she wanted to expand her research and work with me on “a big book” of ultra-realism, a book that echoed some of the sobering literature that followed the first world war. Neither of us expected to spend more than three years writing and researching the book, an expectation that seems silly now. War is a conundrum, and no writer has ever sorted it all out. But you get hooked trying, hooked looking for the meaning behind all that loss, all that waste. You look and look, and before you know it, ten years have passed.

Across the decade it took to research and write the story (1998-2008), we struggled again and again with the same problem, the fundamental problem faced by all writers, that of structure. We had only one criterion: the book had to be “organic,” which is to say, we wanted the shape of the story to grow out of the story itself. We followed no critical theory, no orthodoxy, no classic paradigm. We were writers thinking like writers, asking only one question—what would work?

We submitted the final manuscript for *Tears in the Darkness* to senior editor Paul Elie at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in April 2008. It amounted to 681 pages of narrative. By the end of August the manuscript was ready to go into production, and Beth and I had an exchange of emails with Paul about the subtitle. We wanted to label the book a “story.” Paul wanted to use the word “chronicle.”

“The use of datelines from beginning to end makes it quite literally a chronicle,” he argued.

“Take a look at Schama’s *Rembrandt’s Eyes*,” we shot back. “Uses datelines galore. Publisher calls it a ‘biography.’”

“Yes, of course,” Paul said. But “as for *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, it seems to me to be ‘narrative portraiture’—which is what I was suggesting about your work . . . .”

Later that day I was speaking by phone with a colleague in Chicago and told him about the curious term our editor had used to describe our book.

“Narrative portraiture?” the colleague said. “Ooh, I like that. What does it mean?”

I didn’t know, exactly. We hadn’t created anything new, Beth and I. We’d followed the Eliot doctrine—“art never improves . . . but the material of art is never quite the same.” In other words, we’d borrowed fragments of structure and architectonic from the past and tried to refine and adapt them to the present. Was Paul just marketing with his term “narrative portraiture”? Or had we managed to make what Eliot modestly calls “progress,” some small “development” or “complication” that makes a work both conforming and individual?

Ten years ago we’d started with the idea of aping John Hersey’s 1946 *Hiroshima*, which had aped Thornton Wilder’s 1927 *The Bridge at San Luis Rey*—both stories told through the shifting point of view of a small group of

characters loosely connected to one another. A number of other writers had used variations of this design: Tom Wolfe in *The Right Stuff*; Tony Lukas, to a lesser degree, in *Common Ground*; Melissa Fay Greene in *Praying for Sheetrock*.

So in 1998 we started interviewing to find our characters. Beth attended to the complex history of the event, and I went into the field with a notebook and tape recorder. I worked the East Coast first—Pennsylvania, Florida, New York state, Virginia. Scores of interviews. We were looking for individuals that we might intermingle on the page to form a narrative group, a construct or repertory of characters to act as stand-ins for the experience of the 76,000 men who'd surrendered to the Japanese on April 9, 1942.

The interviews were not going well. Overall we were looking for men of insight, those who understood what had happened to them and had found some meaning in the experience—characters, as Henry James described them, who were “finely aware and richly responsible” enough to carry the narrative. Few of the men, we soon discovered, had experienced every aspect of the historical event we wanted to cover; some, for example, had fought in the battle, while others had waited in reserve, and some had made the death march on Bataan while others had been captured on a nearby island, Corregidor. Many of the men were shy and under-educated and had difficulty expressing themselves. Others, eager to make sure their role in history was remembered, had trouble with the truth. (What did Hemingway say of war stories? “You learn just as much as you are able to believe.”) More often than not crossing a man's threshold I'd run into a wall of *odium inimicus*. A large number of the former POWs still hated their Japanese captors, and their bitterness and anger had reduced their experience to a personal footnote, a venomous afterthought. So after some six months of exploratory interviews, we had two, perhaps three candidates for our list of *dramatis personae* and, hoping that a change in geography might change our luck, I headed west for a swing through California, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Texas. At first I got more of the same, then I landed in Billings, Montana to talk with a man named Ben Steele.

We'd been interviewing in clusters to stretch our research budget, and it was something of an extra expense to go to Montana on a swing through the West just to talk with one man, but, given his profile, we guessed he might be worth it. His “war story” was more complete than most; he suffered through every episode in the saga—fought on the front lines in the battle, made the death march, almost died on a prisoner-of-war work detail building a road through the jungle, sailed on one of the infamous “hell ships” to Japan, where he'd been imprisoned as a slave laborer in a coal mine. And his pre-war and post-war stories were rich with detail, anecdote, American emblems. He'd worked as a cowboy, a ranch hand and camp tender on cattle and sheep ranches. As a boy he'd met the writer-artist Will James, became bewitched by the process of art and during a stay in a prisoner-of-war hospital had taught himself to draw. After the war he went to the Cleveland Institute of Art then became a professor of art at Montana State University in Billings.

I liked Ben Steele right off. A thoughtful man with an infectious smile who turned out to be a natural narrator, an interlocutor out of what Granville Hicks calls the tradition of the American “frontier,” where the stories were “derived from sharp observation.” As an artist he also had a keen sense of nuance and perspective, on the canvas and off. In short, he was perfect for our purposes, right down to his metaphoric last name.

I talked with him for two days. Then I called Beth and suggested we scrap our initial repertory structure and build the book around Ben. Looking back, we did not at that point think in terms of “portraiture,” but we both knew that we’d have to create something more than standard profile and something less, much less, than a biography. We needed room in the story to do a lot of other work. We had history to render—political, military, cultural history—and we were beginning to assemble a rather large cast of Filipino and Japanese characters, a handful of them major characters. (The Japanese and Filipinos were important; we wanted the book to be centered on an American character, but we did not want to write a one-dimensional Amerocentric book.)

How, we asked ourselves, could we make Ben Steele a “central” character instead of a “main” character? How could we allow him to become the chief agent of the story without at the same time emerging as either its protagonist (which, given the facts, would have made him a lie) or its lead mummer (which would have created a hierarchy in a group of characters whose fate was democratic—they all suffered and died equally in that derelict place).

Abandoning the Hersey-Wilder model, we looked at a long list of nonfiction profilers—Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, A. J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, Hannah Arendt, Jane Kramer, Joe McGinnis—but none of their templates seemed right for our story. So we turned to fiction for a model of a central character and soon started rereading Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. There was a lot of Paul Bäumer in Ben Steele and the reality of the novel, its insistence that at war everyone loses, matched the message we hoped would emerge from our work. We also admired its incantatory, sometimes dirge-like mood and tone. Most of all Remarque’s absolute refusal to cast any of his characters as heroes. I’d spent thirteen months in combat and that word “hero” has always left me dyspeptic.

But *All Quiet* wasn’t quite right. The novel certainly informed our text and reminded us that every page should serve the larger story, which is to say reflect the overall truth of the work. The problem was its design did not allow for the elements in nonfiction that serve as asides to the main story line: history with its facts, figures, anecdotes, multiple agents and their multiple agendas, conflicts and subplots; technical topics and subjects raised in the story that need to be explained and amplified for the reader; the cultural context necessary to understand how different people behave differently in the same set of circumstances; the kind of dramatic irony created by real coincidence, irony that is not a cliché; most of all the liberal use of primary

sources, particularly letters, diaries, and journals, many of which, in our case, had been previously unpublished and would give our readers the satisfaction of encountering fresh, unmediated voices.

To accomplish all this and, at the same time, put Ben Steele at the book's center, we began to think of the work in terms of a play. The war would be the story that ran from first act to last; all we had to do was walk a character on stage when we needed him, let him do his work, then exit to the wings. We'd just walk Ben Steele on stage more than the others, use the parts of his story—both Ben at war and Ben growing up in Montana—strategically to stitch all those disparate elements of nonfiction together.

Our plan left the manuscript a lumpish mess. The segments about Ben as a Montana cowboy disrupted the flow of the war narrative. They also acted like lime, neutralizing the sharp irony of the Japanese stories and Japanese characters we had worked so hard to interview and render. In other words, it shifted most of the empathy to Ben when we wanted the reader to consider every character with an equal emotional eye. We didn't want the book to be Ben's story. We wanted it to be everyone's story with Ben at the center.

Sorting through the mess, we decided to leave Ben's war moments where they were and pull the stories about his youth and early days on the range into interstitial chapters. But we got carried away again, made those interstitial much too long and at first couldn't figure out how to cut and reconfigure them.

All along we'd been studying Ben Steele's sketchbooks. An artist's sketchbooks are his diaries, a diurnal record of what's going through his mind, how he's trying to "work out" his art and life. Ben's sketchbooks for the most part were filled with two subjects—objects from his part of the country (log homesteads, horses and riders, sagebrush and cottonwoods) and sketches of Japanese guards and bedraggled prisoners of war. All the sketches were impressionistic, minimalist line drawings floating on a white page, vignettes surrounded by vapor. And, looking back, it was in those line drawings that we found the answer to the interstitials, an answer, in retrospect, that led to the practice Paul Elie calls "narrative portraiture."

We soon found that the shorter and more elliptical, or impressionistic, the interstitials were, the better they worked. And when we were able to render them in a slightly poetic or suggestive mode they worked very well indeed. In other words, when we aped our central character, our artist, and created vignettes, the interstitials not only advanced the narrative, they did so in a very short space and enhanced, rather than hindered, the flow of the main chapters, the war story and history.

So we were, in effect and without labeling it, practicing a kind of portraiture. The practice worked so well in the interstitial chapters on the young Ben Steele that on a rewrite we decided to revise those parts of the

*continues on page 56*

*Tears in the Darkness . . .*

## The logistics—and cost— of ten years of research and writing

I can tell you how much money we spent during the ten years we worked on *Tears in the Darkness*, but I cannot, nay would not, calculate its real cost, the one to our family, or I'd never write long-form nonfiction again.

For the record, we received an advance of \$160,000 (less \$16,000 in agent fees)—one third on signing, another third begged from the publisher after five or six years, the final third in 2008 after the manuscript was finished and accepted. We raised \$50,000 in grants, fellowships and so forth. The raw costs of the book—a lot of travel, research expenses including books and copying, etc., salaries for transcriptionists and translators and research assistants, equipment (we burned through three computers), and more miscellaneous expenses than I can list—the raw costs came to more than \$200,000. If that math seems to leave us in the red, you're good at arithmetic. We went into our own pockets to the tune of \$100,000 across the last ten years just to cover expenses, and it left us broke at several points and with a large loan.

The point of all this, the only point worth writing about, is the way major commercial publishers fail to fund the kind of work they claim readers clamor for. I'm not an historian of American publishing, but I'd be surprised if the situation was ever any different. The business model for American publishing is atavistic, medieval at best; the lion's share of the risk is on the writer and the lion's share of the profits goes to the publisher. They could adopt a different model, one that takes advantage of the tax and business expense laws, but that's not likely to happen. Writers are still considered independent contractors. You make your best deal, you pay your own costs, you balance your own books.

Fine by us. We didn't sit down to make money. (How could we with ten years of man-hours times two?) We sat down to write a good book, cost in time, expenses and everything else be damned. We kept our eye on the page, not the bottom line. That, of course, will be written by the reader.

—*Michael Norman*

main chapters where we had paused to profile other men—Americans, Japanese, Filipinos. Thinking about this recently, Beth suggested that what we had done was to move or “shift the portrait frame” across the story from one character to another. Sometimes that frame was large and presented a detailed portrait, as of Ben Steele, for example, or of General Masaharu Homma, the Japanese commander during the death march whose portrait runs for more than a hundred pages. And sometimes the frame was small, just big enough to hold a miniature or a snapshot of a character. As Beth described the process, the frame expanded or contracted depending on the size of the role the character played in the story, sometimes pausing for many pages, sometimes for just a paragraph or two. We’d distinguished Ben, she said, because he was the only character who was shown through both a series of small portraits, or poses, that appeared throughout the main war story—beginning, middle, and end—and in the large portrait that emerged when all the interstitials, including the epilogue and prologue, were taken together.

To write about Ben Steele, professor of art, we needed to learn about art, and, again in retrospect, it’s likely some of that learning shaped the way we employed the frames we used to portray him. As writers we’d long ago learned the basic elements of a profile or portrait—the image should be a private view that captures character, reveals psychology, and at the same time suggests the mystery of not being able to really “know” anyone. But through our reading, we had discovered that a portrait can be, perhaps should be, more than just an intimate look at a character. In *The Origins of Impressionism*, Gary Tinterow and Henri Loyrette point out that Degas thought there was a difference between a “portrait” and a “painting”—the portrait was “limited to the simple reproduction of the sitter’s features” while a painting went beyond the figure to include “complementary information . . . context . . . the things and people” that defined the person either in general or in a particular situation. More to our point, the subject of a portrait need not be the main object in the frame or even occupy its foreground. All the subject had to be was the portrait’s “principal motif.” So narrative portraiture, one could say, begins with the practice of thinking of character in terms of motif. In our case it was a useful, and perhaps different, way of conceiving structure and fashioning narrative discourse.

In the end, the most we can assert about “method” is that we aimed to commit an act of literature, as much as that’s possible in a genre driven by information instead of imagination, a form where the impulse to invent must always be tempered and checked by the necessity to authenticate, verify, confirm. Maybe we practiced “narrative portraiture,” or maybe we just borrowed what we needed when we needed it, and Paul was simply reminding us with his label what Eliot had taught writers years before: “What there is to conquer . . . has already been discovered . . . here is only the fight to recover what has been lost.” The rest, as he said, “is not our business.”

---