

# Literary Journalism as a Key to Reporting's Richest Prize

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*If the journalists who receive the prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grants are an indication, writing literary journalism serves as one indicator of journalistic excellence.*

In their thirty years of existence, genius grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation have been awarded to a range of journalists representing many different corners of the profession and many different modes of practice: newspaper reporters, magazine writers, and radio producers; freelancers and staffers; well-established names and little known ones; foreign correspondents and music critics; individualists and institution builders (table 1). But a common characteristic of the MacArthur fellows who are journalists is their application of the techniques of literary journalism in their work. In fact, the use of literary techniques may be the distinguishing feature of more genius journalism than any other explanatory factor. This article explores the work of the MacArthur journalism fellows to indicate the role of literary journalism in their selection. Such an examination can help lead toward a reconsideration of literary journalism as more than just an eccentric cousin in the realm of "real" reporting, a shift that would have implications for conceptions of journalism and for journalism education.

## NATURE OF THE MACARTHUR FELLOWSHIPS

Currently valued at \$500,000, a fellowship from MacArthur represents the most lucrative prize in journalism, fifty times the size of the more established Pulitzer awards. It is also highly selective, as MacArthur numbers just eighteen recipients in its journalism category in the three decades since the foundation announced its first "genius award" on May 18, 1981.<sup>1</sup> Accounting for much of the mystique that surrounds the award is the secretive process by which recipients are selected. The foundation says that it does not accept

applications for a fellowship but instead relies on a panel of anonymous, and temporary, nominators to suggest names, which are then reviewed by a confidential selection panel that makes recommendations to the MacArthur board of directors for its final decision. The criteria seem purposely vague: “exceptional creativity” and “manifest promise.”<sup>22</sup> But in this way the MacArthur award looks both backward and forward, recognizing past accomplishments and the potential for future activities that are worthy of financial support. Those who emerge as winners from the process have the luxury of knowing that absolutely nothing is expected from them—their grants arrive under a policy of “no strings attached.”<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, the MacArthur selection process is highly idiosyncratic, and some of the selections seem to fall outside even the skimpy criteria that the foundation has articulated. Adding to the confusion, the foundation says that fellows are not selected in a specific field, even though it lists them by area of “principal focus.”<sup>24</sup> When the names of the fellows are announced, MacArthur doesn’t have much to say about what they have done to merit such a distinction. A life’s work may be summarized in just a sentence or two with major achievements going unmentioned. MacArthur’s announcement about Michael Massing, for example, cited the “clarity and tenacity”<sup>25</sup> of his reporting but did not mention his instrumental role in the founding and early operations of the Committee to Protect Journalists, which since the early 1980s has worked for press freedom around the world, often by pressuring authoritarian governments to release imprisoned reporters.

Given the size of the prize, the prestige that it has accumulated, and the lack of detailed criteria for selection, it’s not surprising that various commentators have tried their hands at figuring out what exactly the award is rewarding. Joshua Muravchik, writing in the conservative *American Spectator*, noted a strong ideological bias in the process. He argued that a disproportionate number of fellowships had gone to those on the political left, reflecting an apparent belief by the foundation that “an imperishable faith in socialism is a mark of genius.”<sup>26</sup> David Plotz, writing in the online magazine *Slate*, offered a tongue-in-cheek, seven-point plan for gaming the system to improve one’s chances of winning a fellowship. Suggestions include living in New York or San Francisco, holding leftist views, and being “slightly, but not dangerously, quirky.”<sup>27</sup>

#### IDENTIFYING CRITERIA FOR GENIUS AWARDS

Another way to try to discern the criteria applied in the MacArthur process is to review the professional activities of the fellows in the months and years before they were named as MacArthur recipients and to assess their accomplishments before the fellowships were awarded. Certain of the fellows appear to have been recognized for their efforts to build new

**Table 1.** MacArthur fellows with journalism as their principal focus

<b>Fellow</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Pre-award accomplishments</b>
Richard Critchfield	1981	Freelance articles, foundation-funded studies, and three books on life in the developing world.
Thomas Whiteside	1986	A dozen books, many of which were based on <i>New Yorker</i> articles, including several on science and the environment.
Tina Rosenberg	1987	Articles in the <i>Atlantic</i> , <i>New Republic</i> , <i>Esquire</i> , <i>Washington Monthly</i> .
Paul Berman	1991	Essays on liberty published in the <i>Village Voice</i> .
Robert H. Hall	1992	Founded journal <i>Southern Exposure</i> , an investigative magazine focusing on social and political issues in the American South.
Michael Massing	1992	Cofounded Center to Protect Journalists; had begun study of public policy toward drugs based on freelance work in Central America.
Stanley Crouch	1993	<i>Notes of a Hanging Judge</i> , a 1990 collection of essays and reviews, mostly written for the <i>Village Voice</i> , critiquing social movements.
William H. Siemering	1993	Helped launch National Public Radio as first director of programming.
Sandy Close	1995	Executive editor of Pacific News Service.
Alma Guillermoprieto	1995	Broke the story of the El Mozote killings; published <i>Samba</i> , her account of preparing for carnival in a slum neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro.
Charles R. E. Lewis	1998	Founded the Center for Public Integrity, an investigative nonprofit.
Mark Danner	1999	Articles in the <i>New York Review of Books</i> and the <i>New Yorker</i> , including one that became the book <i>The Massacre at El Mozote</i> .
David A. Isay	2000	Radio documentaries and related works that often included no overt journalistic presence, such as a reporter/narrator.
Katherine Boo	2002	A Pulitzer Prize winning series (2000) published in the <i>Washington Post</i> on the District of Columbia's system for mentally retarded citizens.
Adrian LeBlanc	2006	Publication of <i>Random Family</i> , an exploration of inner city lives based on 12 years of close observation.
Alex Ross	2008	Publication of <i>The Rest is Noise</i> , a history of the twentieth century viewed through the prism of music composition, primarily classical.
Lynsey Addario	2009	Photos from Afghanistan, Darfur, Iraq published in the <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , <i>National Geographic</i> , <i>Harper's</i> .
Jerry Mitchell	2009	Coverage of unsolved murder cases related to Civil Rights movement.

institutional approaches to journalism. These include Sandy Close, executive editor of Pacific News Service, a nonprofit group that has focused its attention on covering people and events that often fall outside the scope of traditional news organizations; Charles R. E. Lewis, one of the founders of the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit organization that produces investigative journalism related to public policy; and William H. Siemering, the first director of programming for National Public Radio.

But, more commonly, the fellows have produced a body of work based on their individual efforts in covering the news. These efforts were most often marked by a posture of advocacy, for none of the fellows seems content with the idea of reporter as detached transcriber of events. Rather, their journalism is gauged to advance an argument, almost always within a social or political context. It is this posture of advocacy that appears to be one essential qualifier to be deemed a genius journalist. But advocacy alone is not enough, for the MacArthur fellows are distinguished not only by what they are doing but how they are doing it, and one of the salient characteristics of the MacArthur fellows is their application of the techniques of literary journalism in their work.

A central role for literary journalism in this prestigious awards program may come as a surprise since literary journalism is not always considered a central part of journalism practice or training. Any number of critics have long noted that the dominant paradigm of journalism in the United States is one associated with the objective style adopted by newspapers.<sup>8</sup> By contrast the idea of journalism dependent as much on artful presentation as on rigorous inquiry, a notion advanced unsuccessfully by John Dewey in his ongoing debates with Walter Lippmann, has been relegated for much of the last hundred years to “niche publications, muted and chastened,” as Kathy Roberts Forde has observed.<sup>9</sup>

Viewed from another perspective, however, literary journalism would seem to be an ideal fit with the MacArthur fellows program. To begin with, literary journalism and advocacy journalism have a long association. In his autobiography Lincoln Steffens describes himself as “always on the reform side,”<sup>10</sup> a position that has been shared by many subsequent practitioners of literary journalism.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the markers of literary journalism are consistent with the criteria that are often applied to prize-winning reporting.

These markers, according to Norman Sims, include “immersion reporting, complicated structures in the prose, accuracy, voice, responsibility, and attention to the symbolic realities of a story.”<sup>12</sup> Literary journalism thus conforms to Dewey’s call to combine the “highest and most difficult kind of inquiry” with a “subtle, delicate, vivid, and responsive art of communication.”

Evaluators of journalistic merit agree that this combination is singularly important.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Ivor Shapiro, Patrizia Albanese, and Leigh Doyle interviewed judges for two leading Canadian journalism awards, and found that among a wide range of criteria cited, “only two values were affirmed consistently: writing style and reporting rigor” with the former perhaps even more important than the latter.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, when in 1999 the faculty of New York University’s journalism school set out to identify the “Top 100 Works of Journalism in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” the judges put John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, a classic work of literary journalism, at the top of their list.<sup>15</sup> The MacArthur judges seem similarly inclined to value works of literary journalism.

By examining key works that journalism fellows have published in the period preceding selection, and in one case a work that was funded by a MacArthur grant, this paper will show the importance of literary journalism to the MacArthur fellows program. At least five of the fellows had completed significant pieces of literary journalism shortly before their fellowships were awarded. Another fellow was recognized for his investigative work in the field of environmental journalism but ranged over a variety of topics and frequently brought to bear the techniques of literary journalism. At least two others had employed some of the tools of literary journalism in a hybrid form that combined conventional approaches to current events with literary stylizations. Yet another fellow used his MacArthur money to engage in a complex mix of policy analysis and immersive journalism to provide a critique of the U.S. government’s war on drugs. By contrast, only one fellow, Jerry Mitchell, has been recognized in the MacArthur program for work that has been done in the traditional “objective style” that is most often found in daily newspapers, and even he has produced work that could be noted for its literary stylizations.

#### LITERARY JOURNALISM’S PARTIAL ROLE

**B**efore identifying MacArthur fellows who produced fully fleshed works of literary journalism, this article reviews the works of other fellows who used literary technique in a more limited way. Their works employ those tropes of language commonly thought of as “literary” because they are found in the realistic novel and short story, but in most cases these are flourishes that stand out within a work, or a body of work, that generally relies on a more straightforward approach.

One of these journalists is Katherine Boo, a 2002 fellow and one of the few genius journalists whose work has also been recognized in the Pu-

litzer competition. In her case a Pulitzer, for public service journalism, was awarded in 2001 to the *Washington Post* based largely on a series that she had written describing problems in the way the District of Columbia monitored the health and safety of mentally retarded citizens. She begins the series with the following:

Elroy lives here. Tiny, half-blind, mentally retarded, 39-year-old Elroy. To find him, go past the counselor flirting on the phone. Past the broken chairs, the roach-dappled kitchen and the housemates whose neglect in this group home has been chronicled for a decade in the files of city agencies. Head upstairs to Elroy's single bed.<sup>16</sup>

It's easy to imagine how an entire work could continue in this vein, moving scene by scene and incorporating descriptive details of status, two of Tom Wolfe's prescriptions for his brand of literary journalism.<sup>17</sup> But within half a dozen paragraphs, Boo shifts from a rhetorical mode of presentation to one of exposition when, in staccato fashion, she identifies in a series of bullet points the dimensions of the problem she has uncovered. Rather than inviting her reader to continue sharing the experience of Elroy, she provides summary findings, statistics that could as easily be found in an official, bureaucratic report: "more than 350 incidents of abuse, neglect, molestation or stealing" and retarded citizens "dispatched by the city to work for wages as low as 50 cents a week."<sup>18</sup> So, on the one hand, Boo is not content to rely only on the conventions of objective journalism, such as an abstracting distillation, to report her findings. But on the other, her use of the kind of tropes associated with literature at the beginning is not maintained throughout the article.

Other MacArthur fellows have used a similar mix of objective and literary approaches, but throughout a body of work rather than within a single piece. Stanley Crouch, for instance, received a fellowship in 1993, three years after the publication of his collection of essays, *Notes of a Hanging Judge*. Many of these essays contain harsh, polemical statements delivered with Crouch's trademark directness, such as ascribing to Spike Lee a "fascist aesthetic,"<sup>19</sup> and calling Toni Morrison's *Beloved* a "blackface holocaust novel."<sup>20</sup> But the final piece in the book, "Body and Soul," is a long and lyrical meditation that functions by juxtaposing observations about the history, art, and religions of Italy with observations about the role of history, art, and religion in the American civil rights movement. Crouch introduces the piece with the kind of writing that could as easily have been found at the start of a novel as at the start of a newspaper column:

During the day, Rome has the feeling of rot and revelation one experiences when in the private domain of a handsome old woman, where sweat, sex,

cologne, rouge, yellowed notes and papers, bottled remedies with indecipherable labels, crumbling flowers, photographs that seem to have been taken in a brownish gray mist, clothes stained with experience but never worn anymore, and the smells of countless meals have formed a heavy collective presence in the air.<sup>21</sup>

From here Crouch proceeds to describe the event that occasioned this essay, the music festival known as Umbria Jazz. Like Boo, Crouch has used language to engage with readers but then relies on an expository mode of writing elsewhere in this collection.

Thomas Whiteside, a longtime *New Yorker* writer, was honored with a MacArthur for his work in covering environmental health issues, particularly related to dioxin. But he also published on many other topics and wrote for the ear as well as the mind. One example of his willingness to depart from the standards of contemporary journalism practice is a short essay called "To the Cytherean Phase." There he set as his goal the depiction of cosmic exploration in the spare and eloquent "language of space,"<sup>22</sup> which he found to possess a "peculiar grace"<sup>23</sup> in its reliance on precise and technical terminology. The story describes the mission of the space probe Mariner 2 and ends with a description of its final place in the universe, orbiting the sun. Whiteside writes:

That orbit is describable, in the coldly elegant language of astronomy, by its orbital elements: the semi-major axis and the eccentricity of its conic section; its inclination to the ecliptic; the longitude of the ascending node; the argument of perihelion; the time of perihelion passage. The orbit of the spacecraft, subject only to possible slight distortion by the solar wind, is a perpetual one.<sup>24</sup>

Whiteside's achievement is reached in part through the music of his language, alternating long and short "i" sounds in phrases that build through a series of repetitively constructed phrases until he reaches the final sustained image of eternal, though constricted, motion. This musical language is deployed to help portray a concept, in this case the anthropomorphic qualities of the spaceship: its "eccentricity" and "inclination," its "argument," and "time of . . . passage." This is journalism cast as prose poem.

Another instance of a MacArthur fellow who combined literary techniques with an objective methodology is Massing. His case is of particular note because it is one of the relatively few instances when MacArthur in announcing its selection made mention of a particular project that a fellow was working on.<sup>25</sup> As a general rule MacArthur does not cite possible uses of its funding because of its belief that allowing recipients to follow their creative instincts without outside influence is the key to its fellows program.



Massing, who received his MacArthur award in 1992, used his money to complete a 1998 book, *The Fix*, which is based on, to use MacArthur's wording, "a study of the public policy toward the drug wars."<sup>26</sup> Despite the importance of this topic, it is difficult to see how a purely analytical treatment of the issue would have merited extraordinary attention. In fact, Massing's approach was an innovative combination, as he put it, of "both political and street reporting."<sup>27</sup> The MacArthur money gave Massing the time, four years, to spend interacting with drug users and other residents of Spanish Harlem.

Massing's overarching structural device is to focus on two main characters and the frustrations they encountered. The first of these, Dr. Jerome Jaffe, was a psychiatrist at the University of Chicago who became the first special White House adviser on drugs in 1971. He left under pressure two years later as the Nixon administration took an increasingly law-and-order approach. The other was Raphael Flores, a New York drug counselor who apparently found himself entrapped in a crack cocaine habit. In this way, Massing's book offers a stereoscopic view of drug policy, contrasting the often abstract policy debates in Washington with the concrete ramifications of those policies as they play out in urban neighborhoods.

Massing's publisher had originally wanted him to write a shorter book focusing primarily on policy, a task that Massing acknowledges would have taken less time and effort.<sup>28</sup> But he had become "enthralled"<sup>29</sup> with the idea of narrative journalism. In the end he credits the use of the immersive approach that was necessary to gather the raw material for the street side of his reporting with bringing him to a more complete view of the issue. "I don't think I would have arrived at the same type of understanding," he said.<sup>30</sup>

### LITERARY JOURNALISM'S MAJOR ROLE

This article next examines five MacArthur fellows for whom sustained literary journalism is a distinguishing mark of exceptional work. Again, given the secretiveness surrounding award selection, there can be no definitive proof that their literary journalism on its own brought them their fellowships. But it is also clear that one of the ways that they demonstrated their skill was through literary journalism. These fellows are Richard Critchfield, Alma Guillermorpieto, Mark Danner, David Isay, and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc. They seem to have taken to heart Dewey's argument about artistry and journalism: "Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation."<sup>31</sup>

### RICHARD CRITCHFIELD—1981 FELLOW

The first reporter to be named a MacArthur fellow was Richard Critchfield, a freelance writer who was honored in November 1981. (Ada Louise



Huxtable, then architecture critic for the *New York Times*, was honored at the same time, but for whatever reason MacArthur lists her as an architectural critic and historian rather than a journalist.) Earlier that year Critchfield had published a collection of essays called *Villages*, and three years earlier he had published *Shahhat: An Egyptian*, in which Critchfield attempted to provide a window into contemporary Middle Eastern issues by following a young peasant and his family through the course of the annual agricultural cycle. In other words, his focus would be on the concrete descriptive particular.

As a former newspaper journalist who had published an introductory textbook on reporting, Critchfield was well aware of the conventions of objective journalism and believed that the tools of anthropology, particularly the participant-observation methods used by Oscar Lewis, would allow him to transcend the limits that he felt working at the *Washington Star*.<sup>32</sup> In *Shahhat*, he includes an author's note that makes quite clear that he has constructed this book not to provide merely the facts about one person's life but "to show, through the life of one Egyptian peasant"<sup>33</sup> the "universal"<sup>34</sup> situation that results when modern "disruptions affect the way people think and feel."<sup>35</sup> In other words, Shahhat may be just a poor Egyptian peasant, but in Critchfield's retelling he takes on a symbolic resonance that is intended to help the reader generalize from the particulars of his situation to a deeper understanding of the social and economic challenges in the developing world.

**T**he first chapter of the book tells the strange story of Shahhat's origin, how his mother was terrified that her husband would divorce her because none of the four male babies she had borne had survived childhood. Although a devout Muslim, the woman, Ommohamed, sneaks "late one night into the walled grounds of the great stone mortuary temple of Ramses III to appeal to the ancient god."<sup>36</sup> Critchfield then details her descent to a ritual pool, where:

She moved and swayed, quivering from throat to ankles, now begging Allah to forgive her, now fervently calling upon Ammon-Ra, the Unknown, to help her conceive a son so endowed with the force of life that he would not die as her other sons but would live on to manhood. Round and round she moved, hypnotized by her own whispered invocations, at last collapsing in a panting, trembling heap. Then, fighting back revulsion, she dipped her hands in the slimy black water and drank of it.<sup>37</sup>

We also learn that upon Shahhat's birth, and befitting a figure who is intended to transcend his specific circumstances, the name he receives actually has two meanings, a low one, "beggar," and a more noble one, "he who demands of God."<sup>38</sup> Such details are used to add to Shahhat's symbolic stature in the way a fiction writer would use intentional ambiguity to develop a character in a novel or short story.

Critchfield converts the chronology of a research study into the kind of plot one would find in a novel by marking time in a way that emphasizes the harvest cycle and suggests the unfolding of a storyline. Ommohamed's preconception ritual at the ancient temple took place in August, "the time of year when a howling wind rose each night from the Libyan desert."<sup>39</sup> The action of the book then moves ahead to another August, twenty years later, when her husband dies and the male responsibilities of the household shift to Shahhat. The body of the book covers the next year and climaxes the following August, in what might have been an attempted suicide by Shahhat, who has grown increasingly disillusioned with his life and his prospects. This brush with death occurs on the last night of the Feast of Abu Hagag, when a band of desert horsemen are scheduled to appear, "brandishing wooden staves over their heads, screaming thrilling cries, and galloping furiously back and forth on a narrow track through the crowd."<sup>40</sup> Somehow Shahhat, resplendent in a new white turban and tunic, gets caught up in the charging horses, and the focus turns to "the horses' plunging hooves and the white tunic and the clouds of thick yellow dust all rolled over and over again together slowly, the white turning red, and the slowly pounding hooves and the yellow dust, rolling over and over again slowly."<sup>41</sup> Such is the creation of literary scene. Shahhat survives, and in Critchfield's telling, at least, the peasant becomes reconciled to the conflicting tensions of ancient tradition and the modern world. While his youthful passions are gone, Shahhat, in the closing lines of the last chapter, "is as easily amused and quick of comprehension as he ever was. No one tells a better story in Sha'atu's café of an evening."<sup>42</sup> Just as Crouch introduced his essay with sentences that could have begun a novel, Critchfield has crafted a novelistic ending. He does so not by describing a particular incident the way a reporter might but by evoking a mode of being that Critchfield has experienced as a participant in, as well as an observer of, the life of Shahhat's village.

#### ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO—1995 FELLOW

Like Critchfield, Alma Guillermoprieto published two books in the years leading up to her selection as a fellow, one a collection of essays and the other a year-in-the-life story of a particular locale. The latter, *Samba*, once again focuses on the concrete descriptive particular, and in this case the samba dance form as a way into the life of the *favelas*, the shanty towns that ring Rio de Janeiro, and by extension into the nonwhite cultures of the developing world. Guillermoprieto shows how samba has become a source of pride, an outlet for creative expression, a way of demonstrating excellence, an organizing principle, and a platform from which to look down upon the dominant elite culture. "One of the subtler forms of amusement for blacks at carnival time

is watching whites try to samba,” she writes. “It’s not that blacks mind; that whites look clumsy while they’re trying to have fun is a misfortune too great to be compounded by mockery, but it’s also a fact that can’t be denied.”<sup>43</sup> For powerless people, samba is a way to participate in power, a power she evokes by describing the *bateria*, or rhythm section that is at the core of a samba performance, and the sounds that it produces:

It was what one tied to the railroad tracks might hear as a train hurtles immediately overhead: a vast, rolling, marching, overpowering wave of sound set up by the *surdos de marçacao*—bass drums about two feet in diameter in charge of carrying the underlying beat. Gradually a ripple set in, laid over the basic rhythm by smaller drums. Then the *cuica*: a subversive, humorous squeak, dirty and enticing, produced by rubbing a stick inserted into the middle of a drum-skin. The *cuica* is like an itch, and the only way to scratch it is to dance.<sup>44</sup>

These layers of percussion become a metaphor for the dynamics of the *favela*, where tensions and counter-tensions run over each other, punctuated from time to time by outbursts of anger or passion.

The book is structured with a prologue, in which the author explains the discomfort she feels living with the services of a maid in an elegant section of Ipanema and how she is slowly drawn to learn more about the samba and the samba “schools”—the huge volunteer dance teams, thousands strong, that compete in noisy celebrations at the time of carnival. At the end of this introductory section, Guillermprieto describes her request to be allowed to observe, as a reporter, the samba school Mangueira as it goes through its preparations for carnival. Although she is rebuffed by Mangueira’s president, she is befriended by a group of women who encourage her to come back to the group’s next major event. Soon Guillermprieto goes from observer to participant, when she is invited by one of the women to perform in a fifty-dancer “wing” that will be part of Mangueira’s entry. Eventually she decides to move to the Manguiera neighborhood, which allows for her to adopt the immersive mode of reporting that is often key to literary journalism. The rest of the book builds toward carnival, and the final chapter ends with these two sentences:

Very fast now, we trot behind as the float gathers speed, rushing over the beer cans, the cobblestones, past the shacks, past Zumbi, past the throngs of waving, cheering well-wishers, past the entry gates and the latrines to where the din of the *bateria*, the deafening, welcoming roar of the crowd are waiting. We’re on.<sup>45</sup>

Guillermprieto has brought her readers to the climactic moment of the competition—and left them there, hanging. It is the trick of the teasing storyteller.

## MARK DANNER—1999 FELLOW

Although the MacArthur Foundation maintains that it has no set criteria for selecting its fellows, there is one event that, perhaps coincidentally, brings together at least three of the award winners: Guillermprieto, Mark Danner, and Susan Mieselas, a 1992 fellow whom MacArthur lists under photography rather than journalism. All three were involved in the press coverage of a large-scale killing of civilians in El Salvador in 1981. Guillermprieto and Mieselas provided some of the initial reports of the atrocity in early 1982, reports that were disputed by the U.S. State Department, the Salvadoran government, and by other elements of the media, notably the *Wall Street Journal*. A dozen years after the incident those doubts were dispelled in a definitive account of what happened published by Danner, first as a *New Yorker* article that took over nearly an entire issue, and later as a book, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*.

Danner makes clear from the subtitle of his book that he intends it to be read both as literature and as journalism. The work is particularly resonant with literary symbolism when he identifies it as parable, in other words a narrative to teach a lesson of how an atrocity “came to happen and came to be denied.”<sup>46</sup> Much of the book provides a chronological accounting of the incident and its aftermath, including an investigation many years later that included the exhumation of human remains. Nonetheless, it is structured so that it begins in October 1992, close to the end of the events that make up the parable, when a team of forensic anthropologists arrives at El Mozote. Danner uses the prologue to introduce a witness named Rufina Amaya Marquez, who responds, “Didn’t I tell you?”<sup>47</sup> when the forensic anthropologists excitedly report that they have unearthed two dozen skeletons, most of them children, proof that the disputed massacre had occurred. In that simple question, “Didn’t I tell you?” the narrative complication is posed, and will eventually provide entree to the beginning of the narrative chronology. It is, of course, a tried and true literary technique, and perhaps one of the most notable of recent examples is that by another Marquez, the Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, when in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel that launched his reputation as a world-class author, he begins with, “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, in a literary device that manipulates chronology, the present is prologue to the past. And that is the case when Rufina Amaya Marquez asks, “Didn’t I tell you?”

Although presented as a parable, Danner’s story remains firmly rooted in facts. In the book version, notes and a reprinting of original documents take

up more than 100 pages, which is roughly two-thirds the length of the narrative. But the author wishes for his readers to look beyond the people and the scenes that are presented here to understand them as symbolic of larger forces and elements of the lesson he seeks to convey.

In the final passages of the book, Danner highlights how information is collected and shared as he describes a trip that a visitor might make through the region where the massacre occurred. Based on encounters with people and places that the author refers to, this excursion invites the reader to consider the role of initial reports, folk legends, artistic commemoration, and finally institutional preservation, as Danner ends this trip at a museum displaying photographs of the clandestine radio station that broadcast news about the rebellion.

The radio station also played a key role in the demise of the military commander who was most directly responsible for the El Mozote massacre. Rebels placed a booby-trapped transmitter so that it would fall into the hands of the military. After the commander took off in his helicopter carrying the rigged transmitter as evidence of the apparent demise of the radio station, the equipment was detonated by guerillas using a remote control, destroying the aircraft and killing all aboard. In front of the museum, Danner writes, “You will find a dramatically twisted and burned torso of steel. As the people there will tell you, it is what remains of a helicopter that was blown from the sky one fine day, and it happens to be the most cherished monument in all Morazán.”<sup>49</sup> This final image, monumentalizing ruin and revenge, is the moral of the story and illustrates Danner’s lesson, that those who are fixated on controlling the dissemination of knowledge will eventually be brought down by their efforts.

#### DAVID ISAY—2000 FELLOW

David Isay is frequently described as an independent radio producer, a term that fails to describe his methods and achievement adequately. In announcing his fellowship, MacArthur said, “Isay incorporates impeccable craftsmanship and a strong social conscience into his first-person nonfiction storytelling,”<sup>50</sup> which comes closer to capturing the nature of his work but still falls significantly short. In fact, one of Isay’s key innovations has been to avoid a first-person presence and instead to remove himself from his accounts, an approach that he says he borrowed from literary journalist Joseph Mitchell.<sup>51</sup>

An example of a radio program that he consciously modeled after Mitchell’s work,<sup>52</sup> from subject matter to presentation, is *The Sunshine Hotel*, which aired in late 1998 and described the inhabitants of a Bowery flophouse. Al-

though listeners may not recognize it on a first listening, the documentary unfolds as an epic descent into the netherworld. Like Medieval or Renaissance allegories, it is a tour of a frightening parallel world that includes an all-knowing guide. Moreover, it's structured within a matched set of opening and closing scenes, which record how tenants check in and check out.

The hotel manager serves as the piece's narrator and like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, he serves as tour guide, taking the listener from one part of the hotel to another and along the way introducing various residents. They tell their stories in highly condensed form, sometimes only a few sentences, that have been woven tightly together through Isay's precise and highly selective editing, a process that took seventy hours of raw tape and reduced it to less than half an hour. Isay, who once described himself as coming from "a family of therapists,"<sup>53</sup> has likened his work to sessions of talk therapy that take listeners to "places they probably wouldn't want to go."<sup>54</sup> In this case the trip seems to be through the back, dark spaces of the human psyche. The guests give the true accounts of their lives, but it is not hard to make the leap to understand them as representations of various personality disorders. There is, for example, Anthony "Fat Tony" Coppolla, a 420-pound example of the unconstrained id. His impulsive and uncontrollable eating has ballooned his body so that he can no longer wear regular clothes and instead covers himself with a sheet. Other residents of the hotel include a guitarist who compulsively plays the same the tune even while saying that he is writing new melodies in his head, and a Vietnam veteran who retreats into fantasy, elevating a routine run to the drugstore into a reenactment of a jungle patrol.

Just as Mitchell worked to create a literary experience in which the presence of the journalist has been minimized so as not to be a distraction to the reader,<sup>55</sup> Isay has developed a signature technique in which the radio story is told without intrusion by a journalistic narrator or interviewer. *The Sunshine Hotel* unfolds in exactly this way, with the hotel manager providing the narrative bridges and background information to round out the story. Isay's voice is never heard.

#### ADRIAN NICOLE LEBLANC—2006 FELLOW

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's journey to a MacArthur fellowship was almost as ragged as the lives she describes in her book *Random Family*. As *New York* magazine noted, it "took 12 years, two agents, two publishers, five editors, and 16 grants"<sup>56</sup> for her original plan to write about the rise and fall of a \$1 million-a-week New York drug dealer named Boy George to evolve into a densely reported and evocatively written account of what her subtitle described as a story of "love, drugs, trouble, and coming of age in the Bronx."<sup>57</sup>

LeBlanc's narrative reflects and reinforces the sense of disordered con-

nectedness that is her overwhelming theme. She starts the book with a portrait of Jessica, “a sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican girl”<sup>58</sup> who will become one of Boy George’s prime girlfriends but who eventually lands in jail and drops out of sight for many of the book’s forty-four chapters. LeBlanc introduces the teenager with a description of the way that she “radiated intimacy” with her “voluptuous shape”<sup>59</sup> and then lays out the complicated family milieu through which she travels, living with her mother, brother and two half-siblings as well as her mother’s live-in boyfriend. Jessica soon finds herself in jail, and the bulk of the rest of the book is devoted to Coco, who comes into the picture through her relationship with Jessica’s younger brother Cesar, the father of her first child and before long convicted and in prison for after accidentally killing a close friend.

Over the next decade and a half Jessica and Coco endure a series of setbacks, some of their own doing and some not. At times the structure of the book may seem no more than a mirror of the complications of their lives. But at the end of the book LeBlanc pairs a set of birthday parties, for the two women’s first-born daughters, to bring her story to a conclusion and to focus on the subtle but sure ways in which poverty can retain its grasp over people.

To celebrate that her daughter Serena has reached the age of sixteen with virginity intact, Jessica arranges for Serena and her friends to have a limo and driver for the evening. Automobiles are, of course, the kind of status detail that is often found in literary journalism. But in Serena’s case a limousine, far from being an indicator of financial freedom or upward mobility, demonstrates the way in which an impoverished imagination that is trapped in established routines can prove to be the greatest barrier to escape. The teenagers are enchanted with the idea of the limo but don’t know what to do with it. They direct the chauffeur to take them to Times Square, but once they arrive they can’t figure out where to go next. Ultimately they decide to return to Jessica’s old neighborhood in the Bronx, and upon arrival they undermine the whole idea of the limo by getting out to walk. Jessica is furious when she hears this.

Serena’s limo ride is the final action that LeBlanc includes in her reporting, but she does not present it as the final scene of her story. Instead the last chapter of the book backs up in time to recount an optimistic moment at the climax of a birthday party the year before for Mercedes, the first of Cesar and Coco’s daughters, a party held at the prison where Cesar is incarcerated. Thus the haphazard lives of Jessica and Coco and their families seem to be tied together through the enactment of family rituals that somehow manage to suggest a flicker of hope amidst great misery. But this is authorial sleight



of hand, as a consideration of the chronology reveals. The moment that ends the book is not, as it might first seem, a window to a brighter future. It is a memory—a way of showing how people without prospects are trapped within the past.

### CONCLUSION

The MacArthur Foundation says that its awards are not so much for past achievement as for the promise of significant new accomplishments. But clearly the foundation relies on evidence of past achievement to make its assessment. This study suggests that the successful application of literary techniques that break from traditional standards of detachment and objectivity was at least a contributing factor in the selection of nearly a third of the eighteen fellows with journalism as their main “focus” who were picked in the first thirty years of the program. At least three other fellows made some use of literary techniques in the years prior to their selection while another used the MacArthur money to fund the reporting that helped provide a literary dimension to a policy study. Whether they were writing about the relationship between Renaissance art and jazz, the rituals that surround the *samba*, or the chaotic conditions faced by America’s urban underclass, the subject didn’t matter. They still approached the material with literary methods in mind.

These findings should lend impetus to G. Stuart Adam’s call for a reorientation of journalism, and journalism education, toward the humanities and away from the social sciences. Writing more than a decade ago, Adam argued that “it is time to start at the beginning, to incorporate an understanding of the creative process more fully into the study of journalism, and to equip students with more appropriate capacities of execution and judgment.”<sup>60</sup> Echoing Dewey, Adam emphasized the importance of incorporating “the spirit of art and the humanities”<sup>61</sup> into journalism and the study of journalism.

But no one should be fooled into thinking that such a shift can be accomplished quickly or easily. The story of the MacArthur genius journalists is a story of arduous effort expended over long periods of time and involving a rare and meticulous level of craft. Journalism education, generally limited to courses offered by the quarter or semester, does not lend itself to this kind of activity, and most newsrooms are similarly biased toward shorter turnarounds. What this study highlights, however, is that for those who are willing to take on the challenges of literary journalism the rewards can, indeed, be rich. Perhaps the evidence presented here can contribute to the ongoing consideration of ways to move the study and appreciation of literary journalism away from the edges and closer to the core of an understanding of what makes great reporting great.

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## ENDNOTES

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