Writing What You See, Not What You Think You See

I work for *The Globe and Mail*. I'm what they call a rotating feature writer. So I mostly write big, long stories. I don't write every week.

There are two kinds of information. There's the kind of information that you know you need to know—that's mostly what you read on the front page. It's often dreary. It tells you interest rates are going up, if there's any flu vaccine, any world scourges that we need to avoid this week. It's the stuff you need to know to live your life.

And then there's information you didn't know you wanted to know. This is the kind of information that I like to write about. It's off-agenda, tends to come in the form of stories, not just information and facts. It's the stuff that makes your life worth living.

Years ago I picked up an old copy of *The New Yorker*. I started reading this article. It was about oranges—a story about oranges around the world. I started reading it and I thought, "This guy's obviously on drugs." And I kept reading it, I got to the end of it, and it's thousands and thousands of words long! That's a long article. And then it says, End of Part One." Holy cow! There were other parts, and they were all fascinating—the trade in oranges rivals the trade in slaves. Oranges have quite a history, one that stretches from ancient kings to the mafia in Florida.

Then, a couple of years later, I was walking through the bookstore and I saw this book called *Oranges*. Well, the article had been turned into a book. John McPhee, one of the great nonfiction writers of all time, wrote it. He's a great reporter, and he really knows how to tell the story.

That's the kind of story I want to write, one that gives you information you didn't know you wanted to know. Before I read the article, I really had no interest in knowing anything about oranges. I could have happily lived without knowing anything about them. But I felt alive when I read it because it was about this thing that I had held in my hand and peeled and relished eating hundreds of times, and yet knew nothing about.

I like that kind of discovery. I love details. I like to know a lot—I don't actually know a lot, but I like to try. Because I like to figure out what it is I'm interested in. I think what you're interested in is what you should write about, pretty much without exception.

And I really like to feel things when I read them. I especially like to feel things about the real world. That's the kind of information I want. I'm talking about long-form journalism, or literary journalism, or New Journalism. I'm not saying I can do it all the time. I'm not saying I'm that great at it. But it's what I always try to do. I think it's the only kind of journalism that's worth doing if you have any gumption at all, because if you try to do the other stuff you'll end up a spent version of yourself within about twenty years.

Because what happens in that approach is, you go in and write what somebody else wants you to write. This becomes more and more the case. And gradually you lose your sense of what really matters to you. Newspapers mostly put stuff on the front page because it's supposed to be important, as opposed to stuff that actually feels truly important, personally significant or interesting. That would be too eccentric for the front page. I mean, if we stand up here and somebody says something and then keels over and dies, we know that's important. It's what is called "felt life." That's what I want to write about. Felt life is what you live. I want to recreate felt life. I want to recreate some aspect of what it felt like to be alive, at least within the context of a particular

story. But that's not the traditional purview of the news.

If you're still in any doubt, I do not have a journalism degree. I came out of the University of Toronto with a degree in English and philosophy or something like that—hopeless. I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I tried to get into law school, but I kept getting drunk before the LSATs. I thought this was a sign that I didn't want to be a lawyer.

So I applied to a bunch of places looking for a job, and got rejected, except at the *Financial Post*, based in Toronto, where I wrote a funny letter. They said, "Oh, he's funny, get him in here." So I went in and they said, "What would you like to write about? What does your father do?" I said, "My dad's a scrap metal broker." So they asked, "Would you like to write about gold?" And I said, "He's a scrap dealer! He buys stuff from the back of a truck and sells it." And they said, "Well, would you like to write about real estate?"

I guess they wanted somebody slightly younger. Slightly younger? To me, a lot of people at the *Financial Post* seemed to be a hundred eighty years old. They weren't, but that was my callow impression. I said, "Oh, maybe that would be good." They said, "All right, you're on the real estate beat."

So off I go, and I know nothing about journalism. Haven't got a clue! When you write a story, you go to the library, you research, you go to the periodical index, the newspaper index, you go to the Internet, you do your fancy research, you get all the stuff you know about the subject, you read all the stuff, you figure out from that a couple of interviews, go and interview those people, write it all down, they tell you to talk to more people, you come back and write the story… right? Well, I had no clue about any of that.

I sit there in the office wondering, "Does somebody call?" People were looking at me sitting there, thinking, "What is he doing? He hasn't moved for two weeks."

Finally, an item comes across my desk, to the real estate reporter, and it's from the Cadillac Fairview Corporation, or the Bramalea Group, one of the companies in what was then the biggest real estate corporation in the world, based in Canada. And the item is a news release saying, "We are transforming Bramalea into Manhattan." I grew up for a couple of years near there, about forty-five kilometers northwest of Toronto, so I knew Bramalea, which is now part of Brampton, and I knew it wasn't Manhattan. It was a hole in the ground. It was nothing. Back then it was a hideous, cultureless, featureless, characterless hole.

I think to myself, "Brampton becomes Manhattan, that's going to be a big project!" So I phone these guys up and I say I'd like to talk to the president of the company. What do I know? So he comes onto the phone. And I say, "You know, I'm really interested in this Bramalea thing turning into Manhattan—that sounds like a great idea." He goes, "Really?" I say, "Yeah, yeah, I'd love to interview you." He goes, "Great, we'll take you out to lunch." He obviously thinks, "I've got a sucker on the line. Whatever I tell him, he's going to put it in the *Financial Post*. The stock is going to go through the roof, and I can retire tomorrow." At least, I couldn't blame him for thinking that.

He says to meet him at some place called Brandy's. It's a disco. Well, not a disco, but there used to be things called singles bars. Except it was lunchtime. But it was kind of groovy because you'd go in and there were glass tables with chrome tubing and these cushy leather seats.

I had no presentable clothes, so I went and bought my first suit. I bought—on sale—a chocolate brown, corduroy, wide-wale, three-piece suit, with a yellow shirt. It was just unbelievable, but I thought I looked like the cat's ass.

So off I go to this thing. I walk in wearing my new poo-brown, wide-wale suit—I swear,

the wale was so wide I looked like four lanes of superhighway—and I sit down, and for some reason, they're all sitting down normally, but I have a groovy slung-leather low seat, and I sit down at the table, and my eyes barely crest the glass-and-chrome tabletop. They're all wearing twelve-hundred-dollar nailhead beauties. And their hair! Look-sharp, feel-sharp, be-sharp, file-your-head-to-a-point hair—every single hair is shellacked in place.

I do know that reporters take notes (I've seen movies). So I take out my reporter's notebook and I'm about to ask, "Tell me about the company," when they start talking—I don't say a word. I'm writing and I'm writing and drinking coffee, and they're eating. And they talk for about forty-five minutes, maybe an hour. And I'm thinking to myself: "You've got to ask a question because that's what reporters do."

But instead they ask questions, and through asking questions they redirect the rational course of the conversation to a conclusion that they want to come to. I can't think of anything. I've done no research, and I'm sitting there, being snowed by three of the best-paid executives at Cadillac Fairview.

Finally, they stop and say, "Perhaps you have a question."

And I go, "Yes! I do." And I've been drinking a lot of coffee, and it has really gotten to me. I start to have a bit of a spaz attack, and I go, "How much money do you guys make?"

That's my question. And just as I ask it, I have one of those shivers you have—my mother used to say it was when someone walked over your grave in the future—and I have the sugar for my coffee in a spoon in my hand, and my hand starts to whiz back and forth from the shiver, whereupon I go w-h-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-p with the sugar!

And it's everywhere. On their twelve-hundred-dollar nailhead suits and on their perfect shellacked hair and on me and on the table. One of them has the grace to say, "We never talk about that."

I'm mortified. So I say, "I'm very, very sorry." And then, then, *I get up and walk out of the restaurant!* And all the way back on the subway I'm thinking, "I am meat!" I've got to go back to the *Financial Post*, to my editor, Dalton Robertson. He had been one of the main thinkers at the federal Department of Finance before he became a journalist. He was a very smart guy. He really personified the notion of the first-class mind—the mind that can hold many contradictory ideas at the same time without having a nervous breakdown. He never, ever committed to any point of view, even when he used to smoke incessantly. He never seemed to exhale—because I think if he breathed out, it would have been too much of a commitment to life. But he was sharp.

So I go in, and I'm thinking, I'll just resign. I'll walk up, I'll say, "I'm sorry, I appreciate the opportunity that you've given me. It was misplaced and I will go back and learn to be a journalist, and perhaps one day you can give me a job again." I walk in, Dalton's there, with these viper eyes, and he says, "So, first story—how did it go?"

And so I tell him the whole story. I say, "It was a bit of a fuck-up. I think I was thrown off by their clothes, I don't know. I asked them how much money they made, and I freaked out, spilled sugar all over them…."

He says, "It's a good story. Write that up."

I never did write it up because I didn't understand what he was talking about. It took me ten years to understand what he was saying. And what he was saying was: *The story is what happens*. Not what you think is supposed to happen, not what everybody says should happen. The story is about what actually happens.

Somebody once asked Hemingway what the hardest thing about writing was and he said

there are two things. The first is using the details of reality to recreate emotions in the reader. So you've got to get the reader to feel things. That's hard, but there are actually techniques for that. The second, harder thing is to know what it is you actually noticed and saw and felt, as opposed to what you think you should have noticed and seen and felt, or what everybody wants you to see and think and feel, or what you yourself wish you had thought and seen and felt, because that would make you feel like a genius.

You have to resist that tendency, even within journalism, where we're supposed to be resisting it in the first place. Sometimes I think it's a structural problem, ingrained in the craft of journalism. At the *Globe*, for instance, where I work, the first meeting of the day is at 9:30 a.m. All the top editors get together and say, "Okay, what do we want to do stories on?" Then they come out with ideas—ideas they have leftover from the night before, ideas that turned up on the Internet overnight, ideas that the other papers and the television and the cable stations are running, that the web is blaring everywhere. And then they assign the writers to do those stories. That's the daily event. I'm not saying they have any choice. But what used to happen, prior to the Internet, is that the editors never met before 3:30 p.m. The reporters would go out into the world, look around and say, "I think I'm going to write a story about this new habit of ugly shoes." The big fat ugly shoe is back, big time! And at 3:30, the editors would ask what's going on, and the reporter would say, "I've got a story on big fat ugly shoes." The stories were based on what had happened in a more immediate purview.

News is so packaged now—because there are so many competitive forms and sources of digitized information, and because it has to be published instantly—the problem today is even more pronounced. We in the media, mainstream or otherwise, figure that we have to do everything everybody else is doing, cover everything that everyone else is covering. Never mind that I can get my news in an elevator now—everyone has to cover what's being covered, even if it's mostly repetition. The problem with the competitive pressures of twenty-four-hour constant news cycle newsgathering today is that it has forced all the forms to do exactly the same thing, over and over again. We live in the middle of this incredible information revolution, and yet ninety-five percent of the information we get today is the same two percent of human experience repeated again and again and again and again. Places like the Pew Forum have studied this, and they consistently find that the so-called "newshole"—a good name for it—is dominated by the same handful of stories, for weeks at a time. The news happens, and then everyone piles on, and how.

I have no interest in taking part in that repetitive, mind-deadening process. I'm never going to be rich, but I'm sure as hell not going to be bored. And if you don't want me to take six weeks to write a story at the *Globe*, a story no one else probably has that way, so that when you read it you can actually feel something new, fine, you don't have to read me. But I'm not going to do that piling on thing, if I can avoid it. Because it's dangerous. Gradually you lose the ability to discern or feel or instinctually understand what feels true. It's a skill that requires steady practice. Hemingway said that a writer only needs to lie three or four times, and then he can't tell the difference anymore.

Editors who understand this distinction—who will let you go out and write these kinds of stories; stories, for starters, as opposed to topics, that are full of scenes and details that are actually true, as opposed to stuff that everybody else says is important—those kinds of editors are rare. In my experience, or at least my experience in journalism (I'm not talking about book editors), I've only worked with a handful who are consistently true to their craft: Paul Tough

at *New York Times Magazine*, Cathrin Bradbury at the *Globe*, Gary Ross at *Saturday Night* magazine, a few others. These are people who will say to you, "Yes, I understand, I get that." You suggest a story, and they have the grace to let you follow your nose. It is an instinctual and mutual understanding.

But, partly because these stories are off the radar or the agenda, when you're doing one, you really have to convince yourself to keep going. I am always thinking to myself, "Should I write this down? Is this necessary?" And I'm constantly answering, "Yes, I should write it down. You never know."

Most of the time, I'm quite shy. So I hate to ask questions. The thing I really hate to do is pull out my notebook and write things down, because then people are looking at me. It's so stupid! Who cares if somebody's writing something down? But I feel it every time.

But when you really begin to understand this kind of story, and you start to sink into it, I don't think there's anything better. The only thing that's better is actually writing this kind of story. And there's so much storytelling now going on—bloggers and journalists and news people—that if you don't tell this kind of story with style, if you're not a good storyteller, if you do not have a voice, and a distinctive way of making your story stand out so that people will want to read it, you'll get lost in the vast modern sea of words.

Felt life is hard to capture; it's hard to report. It's hard work—you have to do all the regular reporting, and then get all the details you need to tell the story well, as a story. It's upsetting; it's exhausting. You constantly doubt that you have enough material. But the more material you have, about every nook and cranny of the story, the more easily it leads to style and voice. And style really is a metaphor all on its own. Style is evidence of individual consciousness. Readers respond to individual consciousness—they take it on as their own. It says, in this massive Niagara Falls of information that crashes down on us every day, this is real. It's a trick, in a way, the writer's illusion. If you can make people feel things through long-form journalism, you make them remember, you actually recreate the thing you are describing in the mind and guts of your reader. At least, that's the ideal.

You've got to know how to do this kind of writing technically, but you've especially got to know how to do it emotionally. And you have to know how to do it boldly. Trust your instinct. You train yourself; you learn how to do it. I have to relearn it every time. You learn to notice the hackle of your interest, catching onto something as you breeze by. You learn to pay attention to those snags in the otherwise smooth, speedy, featureless glide of modern life.

Because this is the thing: There are only four techniques necessary to tell a great story. That's all you need to know. One, there are scenes. Aristotle said a scene is unified by time and place. Tell stories as much as possible in scenes. And if you can go from scene to scene to scene—fantastic.

Now, how am I supposed to convey critical information, such as the socio-economic status of people in the room, by scenes, without breaking one of the four walls of a story or a scene? By using details—what Tom Wolfe called status details—that tell us who we are and where we are. Shoes, hair accents, clothing, stutters, looks, inflections of style. Routines. *Et cetera*.

Then there's dialogue. In most news stories, dialogue is a quote that fills a purpose. Sometimes I want somebody to sort things out and tell me what's going on and what it means. But what I really want is life reproduced. One of the great techniques I like to try is to reproduce aimless chatter. The best dialogue recreates life and gets you to where you want to go in the story.

The fourth technique, the most difficult, is point of view. What is that guy over there actually thinking? I can find that out because I can go and talk to him. And I can actually recreate the inside of his mind.

You don't have to decide whether it was a good experience or a bad experience. There is no notion of what's correct and what's not correct. That goes out the window. You can't think like that. You just recreate the experience and build up the story. The reader will decide.

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