



Literary journalist Michael Norman, Washington Square, Greenwich Village,
New York City

Scholar-Practitioner Q & A . . .

An Interview with Michael Norman

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Born in 1947 in New York City, Michael Norman joined the Marines after high school. His service in Vietnam in the late 1960s provided the basis for his first book, *These Good Men: Friendships Forged from War*,¹ a memoir published to critical acclaim in 1989—which one critic called “as solid a document as readers will find describing the human debris of war, and the strength of character of its survivors.”²

Attending Rutgers University on the G.I. Bill and graduating with a degree in English, Norman then worked for a selection of newspapers, including the *New York Times*. As a reporter and columnist on the paper’s national, foreign, and metropolitan desks, he inaugurated a number of columns, including *A Sense of Place*, a monthly exploration of the dislocations of modern life in one suburban town; *Lessons*, a national column on education; and *Our Towns*, a twice-weekly column on life outside New York City. In addition, his long-form journalism has appeared in various national publications, including the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post Magazine* and *GQ*.

His second book, coauthored with his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Norman, *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath* (Farar, Straus and Giroux, 2009),³ was a work of narrative nonfiction selected by the editors of the *New York Times Magazine* as one of the best 100 nonfiction books ever published. As I noted at the time,

Michael and Elizabeth Norman have taken a historical event, the American defeat and its horrific aftermath in the Philippines at the start of World War II in 1942 and turned it into a spell-binding exploration of the human spirit. At the center of the tale, of course, is the Bataan Death March. But after ten years of incredibly detailed research on both sides of the Pacific,

the authors are able to render its full reality from a variety of individual perspectives: American, Japanese and Filipino. The result is a revelation—not merely a narrative of courage, sacrifice, cruelty and suffering, but also, ultimately, of the redemptive power of reflection and forgiveness. It may also be the most moving book ever written about those dark April days almost seven decades ago and men who experienced them.⁴

Norman joined the faculty of the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University in the early 1990s, where he is a tenured professor of narrative journalism in the institute's literary reportage program. He is currently cowriting a book about New York City's Bellevue Hospital. It will be a narrative exploration of the institution, and in support of the effort he and his coauthor/wife have been appointed visiting professors of research in the hospital's department of emergency medicine.

Having long shared an ardent interest in the nature of narrative, the text below is a transcript of a conversation on the subject conducted via e-mail over a number of weeks in spring 2015. Full disclosure: Michael and I are former colleagues from the mid-1990s at NYU. It is also probably safe to say we are good friends.

David Abrahamson: Our colleague Lisa Phillips has argued that literary journalism permits and perhaps privileges the first-person point of view. She wrote:

While traditional newsroom practices generally require journalists to refer to themselves in the third person, in many works of literary journalism the 'I' is part of the narrative—as gonzo, hometown boy/girl come home, memoirist with a reportorial itch to scratch and various other personae. Whether it is the *first-person major* where the 'I' is at the center of the story or the *first-person minor* where an observer 'I' intrudes minimally on the narrative, the first person is a force to be reckoned with in literary journalism studies and teaching practices. Its use can foster transparency of method and clarity of mission, and yet the first person, with its overt subjectivity, can also interfere with the traditional journalistic goal of seeking the truth and reporting it.⁵

Lisa has asked if the current digital age is fostering a first-person renaissance. Or is the predominance of the "I" a scourge of click-baiting egoism and reader voyeurism? What does the first person enable, and what does it shut down? How do we practice, teach, and critique first-person journalism?

Michael Norman: You are raising the hairs on the back of my narrative neck, which I reckon makes it perfect for our conversation. There is one major point missing from Lisa's overture. When you talk about the first-person singular as a purveyor of story, you automatically raise the single most impor-

tant and most difficult task for any writer—creating a persona that will do the work you must do. And what complicates this is that if the first-person-singular persona is not a fully realized three-dimensional character, you have failed. Yes, I know all about the partially realized first-person narrator as an agent to deliver the story, but that becomes a crutch unless you can find the diction, near-perfect diction, to give the speaking voice a personality.

What, after all, is the place of imaginative reflection in rigorously researched nonfiction narrative? Can the writer be accurate, render scene in all its detail, recreate the experience of the subject or event on the page and, at the same time, slip away from the narrative at tactical spots to express awe, wonder, contempt, disgust, confusion, fear, sadness, even memory. Which is to say: Can you create a nonfiction persona so real and so versatile that he can simultaneously deliver a story nearly perfect in its detail and context and at the same time give the reader a third dimension, creating the illusion of being there but not being there? And without ever using the first person? To put it in a phrase: Can you put flesh and bones on a nonfiction persona without losing the very neutrality that gives your work its authority and credibility in the first place? In other words, if you cannot measure the position and velocity of an object at the same time without effecting the object, then why not make uncertainty a quality of the text?

Abrahamson: I am impressed by the evolution of your thinking about narrator. You have it exactly right—or more correctly, the essence of the challenge exactly right. You have backed into a definition of what must be one of the central challenges of long-form nonfiction. I liked the way you slyly drew a parallel to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Upon reflection, I wonder if one aspect of the challenge is also a bit of Schrödinger's cat?

Norman: I think Schrödinger might be a bit off point. He's really: the more you look, the more you see—which, in turn, could be less, depending on your expectations. Try to translate that into a journalistic maxim! Heisenberg, as I read it, was proven right, but the lesson literary types take away is flawed. To transpose from physics, we are the tool that does the measuring, and, as Heisenberg discovered, we cannot possibly account for all the possibilities of the object. This is doubly true in human relations, as Stephen Crane discovered—witness his search for psychological truth. Completely accurate observation is impossible, and what we are left with is perceptions, impressions, analogs, and referents. We can never really "say" anything to be this or that. Thus our famous shibboleths—truth, objectivity, fairness, as states of achievement—are simply impossible because they defy the laws of nature. The question is: Can we render, recreate, what we have seen and experienced for the reader? Of course we can. I just want to throw off that old, hoary, af-

fected coat of the impartial observer. I don't want to tell; I want to incant. I want to invoke the myths, then set them afire.

Abrahamson: No small ambition there! I liked your explication of the Heisenberg parallel. One additional tangent that also might find support in his uncertainty principle is that there may be limits to what as journalists we can ever know: position or momentum, location or velocity; only one of each pair, never both.

I'd like us to retrace our steps and return to a consideration of how perhaps Schrödinger might apply. In one oversimplified interpretation—I'm told there are a half-dozen "official" ones—Schrödinger's cat is neither alive nor dead until the observer opens the box. Its quantum state remains unresolved until observed. I suspect the thought experiment can work both at the reporting level and, if one ponders the contemporary effects of the media, at the societal level as well. Nudged by a distant memory, I looked up a citation from Schrödinger: Understanding indeterminacy, he wrote, "prevents us from so naively accepting as valid a 'blurred model' for representing reality. In itself, it would not embody anything unclear or contradictory." And then his killer line: "There is a difference between a shaky or out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks."⁶

Norman: Why do we have to open the box? Suppose we thought of the cat in the box as a single object. Its chief property is its uncertainty. For us, then, we must render uncertainty. To open the box is to engage in the object and destroy (change) the uncertainty. Like Schrödinger's agent who opened the box, we are put in the position of determining the truth, but in doing so we have lost the uncertainty. And uncertainty works for us, for writers. It allows us to consider several "truths" instead of thinking of the world in terms of fixed values, a series of certainties. As you know, I'm writing a book about Bellevue Hospital in New York, which means I am dealing with life and death, the two "truths" that moved writers such as Camus to see the world as a mystery, a cruel one perhaps, but a mystery nonetheless. The question I am asking myself is this: Absent the first person—which I confess to often thinking of as a loathsome device—can I deliver both the story of the cat and the box as well as the observer's considerations in opening it? Or does narrative—nonfiction narrative—require more celibacy?

Abrahamson: Perhaps. Most certainly you can try. But I suppose that my point in introducing Schrödinger into our conversation was to suggest that there must be parts, large parts, of reality that will always elude the journalist attempting long-form nonfiction. And many of those aspects of reality the journalist uncovers have—like Erwin's tabby—no true existence until the box is opened. Now I suggest we move from quantum mechanics to the writing

machinery. Let's talk about structure. You once told me that with your Bellevue book you were going to hew to Dante, taking the readers by the hand, leading them through the hospital and letting them discover it in much the same way you did. That sounds like a blend of both the chronological and geographical. Any unique ingredients?

Norman: Since our last exchange, I've had to remind myself of a basic ingredient I discovered working on our last book, *Tears in the Darkness*: Persona is the nucleus of structure. You can come up with all the matrices and architectonics you like. You can diagram, chart, outline till the cat uncurls for breakfast. But if you have not worked out the voice and stance of the persona first, your structure will collapse, a pile of bricks. Persona dictates structure. Here's an example from the struggle we had finding a structure for a big book on Bellevue Hospital. We want to write an inside account or inside look at what happens in America's oldest continuously operating hospital. Yes, I mentioned Dante as model, also Chaucer and Boccaccio. But the guided tour seemed both hidebound and clichéd. So we gave it up, sort of.

Our problem was that the same thing happens in Bellevue every day. Therefore, we lose one of the two elements that narrativists use—time. All narrative writers have to reconcile time and space, moving across time and through space. Technically, a piece of writing without a time in it is not narrative. Narrative depends on the unfolding of events, the passage of time. We looked for timelines, but none made any sense because as in all hospitals, time only matters when you're writing about budgets or strategic planning. Everything else is a series of repetitions: the weekly heart operation, the daily drunk wracked by delirium tremens, the cancer patient receiving the poison they call chemotherapy. Same, same, same. So that left us only with the notion of space, moving across space. Space changes as you move from venue to venue. Maybe the writer is hopscotching between scenes, between encounters in the different services, whatever. The point is that space has to substitute for the powerful momentum of time, the thing that drives narrative forward.

Then we thought: Okay, we'll use space and characters to fuel the narrative. With characters you can create a series of encounters. Simple enough, until your ambition grows and you decide you want to make the famous hospital itself a character as well. How the hell do you do that? History will get you started, but this is supposed to be a story of the present. So we worked ourselves into a Gordian knot. Okay, we said, let's try one solution at a time. To create the hospital as a character—and we spent months trailing engineers, plumbers, masons, carpenters, and so forth—we envisioned ourselves, amorphously at first, as weightless observers, floating outside the hospital, peering into various windows, reporting what we see. Come, Reader, we'll take you by

the hand and fly around peering and eavesdropping. Well, the basic idea was fine: a kind of travelogue of Bellevue in which we stop to meet, watch, and talk with characters. But the nonsense of floating around fell apart as soon as I tried to create a persona to effect it. Also, we didn't want to use the limited first-person plural. We did not want to be interloper characters, this born of my conviction that the best narrative takes place when the writer gets the hell out of the way between the reader and story.

Anyway, that weak notion—floating in the ether—got me thinking about persona in general. The more I thought about it, the more I realized we had to work that out first. Once we did, the structure would become obvious to us. It seemed logical to me that we should return to basic third-person persona. At first I thought, fine, we should just settle for that. Then I started to see a number of variations in the third person. For instance, the writer could give an unnamed, unrealized third person not only a distinct voice but license to step back and reflect on the various characters and situations being written about. In other words, using the third person as I've described it was in fact taking technique directly from the American and French impressionist painters. It had not occurred to me that the third person could be so supple and malleable and full-throated. (I discovered this after taking an advanced narrative class to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; for their oral final, I asked that they explicate the narrative in Van Gogh's *Shoes*.) So we had a persona, a way to deliver story and impression, an invisible chronicler and interpreter rolled into one. And that opened a whole range of structural possibilities.

Abrahamson: That seems like a lot of horsepower to pack into a single persona, enabling it to have a considered set of opinions—indeed, judgments—about both the actors and action taking place. “Full-throated” is certainly the correct adjective. However, let's set this aside for a moment, promising to return, and instead pursue what I hope will be an illuminating tangent. You have always been agile in your approach to pedagogy, and herding a group of your students to the Met to look at fine art is an excellent example. But once you had them standing in front of Van Gogh's *Shoes* and asked them to expound the narrative they found therein, what was their response? Is it possible for you to sum up the answers they shared with you?

Norman: My aim was to demonstrate to the class that narrative is a form of expression that transcends the page. It is like Sartre's notion of consciousness, or more precisely, his notion of existential absence. Which is to say narrative is everywhere. So I allowed them a few moments of hermeneutic recitation to talk about the “story” the shoes might represent. You didn't have to know either the provenance of the painting or the trials and tribulations of Van Gogh. Old shoes, worn shoes, no money, shoes as an object of want, the

shoes of a workingman, fine art as a form of work—you get the idea. I really didn't care what "story" they discovered in the painting. What I wanted them to tell me was how Van Gogh, the narrativist, created his story. Color, brushstrokes, texture of the paint, the rule of thirds, vanishing points, foreground, background, position on the canvas. In other words, I wanted them to explicate the technique of a visual narrative just as they had done with a printed one, identify the painting's artistic devices, how its effect mimicked the effect we try to achieve. Meaning is always augmented with music, the sweet music of a perfect sentence, or for the painter, the vision, the image, the perfect line and well-chosen palate. My aim was to force them to think obliquely, to understand that technique, craftsmanship, artistic choices, and above all a clear idea of what one wants to depict or say, is the aim of every artist in every medium. I didn't tape any of the oral finals—though I wish I had because many were wonderful—so I can't provide you with an example, but from the above our fellow teachers can imagine the deliverable, which was really to encourage them to look deeper, to see story as multilayered, with a palate of moods and tones and a syntax that can be wielded like a painter's brush.

Still, this was the endgame, the capstone, the cherry on the whipped cream, the last swirl of icing on the top tier, and it was voluntary. In the same course I required student teams to deliver grammar lessons every week. Poe—and others, I'm sure—said that grammar was the logic of language. When I introduced this notion at the beginning of the semester, I was sure the response would be a collective "ugh." I was wrong. They liked the grammar and quickly came to see that it was one of the tools they must master. I used Edward D. Johnson's *The Handbook of Good English*,⁷ available as a gratis PDF. This semester we used Lynn Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.⁸ I loved her chatty, smart, and irreverent voice, and so did the students. And lo and behold, they learned the power of the comma, the dash, that pesky semicolon. I wound that class tight, making them write biweekly 500-word "Lessons Learned" papers. I ruthlessly interrupted when they either tried to recap the story or interpret it instead of taking the book apart, chapter by chapter, section by section, and identifying the kind of "work" the writer was doing on every page. To return to your question, the museum trip was then a way to take the wraps off, so to speak, and let them think of narrative as a creative exercise as well as a mechanical one. It was also a ploy. I confess to taking writer acolytes into a temple of fine art in order to advance the notion that nonfiction, a piece of literary journalism, can be as deeply penetrating, as emotive, as soul moving as a Renoir or a Degas.

Abrahamson: Yes, it was a ploy, and perhaps also a conceit. But no matter: If nothing else, you certainly modeled the sort of courageous behavior—

heading off happily into the unknown, ignoring convention, breaking every frame you could find—that any student who aspires to literary nonfiction must learn. In a phrase I heard once, to be comfortable being uncomfortable.

We have explicated *persona* to a fare-thee-well, but if you don't mind, perhaps we could explore two related concepts: narrator and voice. Both, of course, are derived from *persona*, but perhaps can stand as topics on their own. Let's take on the idea of narrator first. Shamelessly appropriating your fine art schema, one might argue that the narrator in Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* is outraged, the narrator in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is overwhelmed, and the narrator in El Greco's *View of Toledo* has a deep sense of foreboding.

A few questions: How does the writer choose the narrator? How can the choice be tested?

Norman: I use the term *persona* rather than narrator, but, with apologies to M.H. Abrams, I reckon those two constructs are the same. Let me use my own struggle with my current work-in-progress about Bellevue Hospital to answer your question. First, good writers reach a point in their careers where, more than just wearing different hats, they can create different narrators. More like pulling on different skins. My favorite example is J.D. Salinger. The "Catcher" is a meticulous construction: all adolescent indifference and angst. And it's created, as are all personae, by diction. Look at Salinger's narrators in his *Nine Stories*. Very different. So one chooses one's narrator—one creates one's speaking construct—after you decide the overall theme and message that emerge from your research, reading, and reporting.

In my case the narrator must do two jobs: he has to guide (think of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Dante, Virgil) the reader through the hospital, letting the reader watch his encounters with doctors, patients, police, carpenters, and on and on. And he has to explain and reflect on what he sees. Since I have a co-author writing the book, I thought about using the royal "we" here and there, making us interlopers in the world of the hospital; limited second person, you could call it. But that stance seemed too artificial and contrived.

My second requirement was a narrator who delivers the story in an incantatory tone. The OED definition of incantation is very close to my purpose: "The use of a formula of words spoken or chanted to produce a magical effect; the utterance of a spell or charm; more widely, The use of magical ceremonies or arts; magic, sorcery, enchantment." My coauthor and I will be writing about nothing less than the human condition, and we will be doing it through an existential lens. So, big hospital, big theme, big issues require a narrator who can tell a simple story, who can explain complex scientific concepts, who can look deep into the heart and soul and invoke the mysteries it

finds there. An example, the attack from the first chapter from the working draft:

In the late summer and early fall, when the soft evening sun turns the leaves of the Weeping Beeches and London Planes in the small park at the corner of 26th Street and 1st Avenue on Manhattan's East Side golden green, Bellevue looks almost beautiful.

The little park is framed by a black six-foot wrought-iron fence, an antique enclosure that gives the verdant square a Victorian look. Just beyond the trees and fence are the oldest of the edifices on the hospital's two-block campus, a T-shaped pavilion and an eight-story administration building, their red-brick facades turning crimson in the yellow light. A stone's throw across the park, the newest of the buildings, a colossal cube of glass, gleams like a block-long mirror, reflecting the blue of the sky and the yellow taxis, red tour busses and ghost-gray delivery trucks that rush and rumble north up busy 1st Avenue.

And while all this may seem surface, the first impression of a passing glance, Bellevue, even in a blink, always arrests the imagination. Behind the black iron fence and green trees, behind the giant glass panels and Flemish-bond brick facades, is a world of woe, a surfeit of suffering. Sometimes the mysterious art and careful science of those who practice medicine there chases the affliction away, and sometimes, when ignorance and error are attending, or when the illness or injury is simply beyond remedy, the "patient"—What better word captures the endurance of the afflicted?—the patient becomes a "mortality," a name on a death certificate, a case study for the Monday morning conference.

You can see an elevated diction here. We wanted that first chapter to say to the reader—without actually saying it—this is going to be a big look at a famous institution and, along the way, a look at what makes us human. I'm also sure you can see the influence that impressionist painting has had on personae I use. Look, together we could write volumes on how to create narrators from the comic to the sublime. But the narrator's stance and telling must be perfectly suited to your subject. I always remind myself that I'm saying more to the reader, much more, than is contained in those sentences. I suppose the best way to describe my approach is to remember what Wayne Booth said about the "implied author": the picture of the author the reader constructs in her mind as her eyes glide across those sentences, as those words, the diction, reverberates in her ears.

Abrahamson: You remind me that I often find it necessary to explain to my literary journalism students the difference between author and narrator. They are, *a priori*, the author of their work, but they must consciously decide

on, and then create, the most appropriate narrator for the piece they have set out to write. And I often fall back on the “voice in the reader’s ear” trope. To your excerpt: It is both lovely and convincing. It reminds me a little of the structure that Robert Frost raised to perfection—which indelibly altered the way I think about the role of storytelling in journalism.

Which leads us to one final topic: Taking Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*⁹ as our starting point, have you any thoughts about the future of literary journalism? Let’s stipulate the brave new digital world and assume that the nature of reading will change, at least to the extent that it will be consumed in digital rather than ink-on-paper form. Thinking ahead a decade or two, might this change the nature of writing?

Norman: Well, you sent me scrambling to two old pathetic collections of Frost’s work that I’d not cracked open since undergrad days. I’ve ordered the four collections that represent his narrative work—*North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), and *West-running Brook* (1928)—to get a better sense of the structure you are talking about. And, of course, as I was getting ready to reshelve those two moldering collections, I had to read “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” from the *New Hampshire* volume, which is eponymous with the name Frost. In that one small poem you see a strong persona, you get a story, the language is incantatory yet direct, and the message existential (“promises to keep . . . and miles to go before I sleep”).

As to Janet Murray, I confess I’ve not yet gotten to *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, though I’ve read a number of reviews and discussions it prompted. I hate setting anyone up as a straw woman, so I won’t take on her points secondhand. But we can explicate a few of the issues she raises, especially the one you suggest: Will new platforms change the essential nature of writing?

Let’s skip past the obvious: texts, blog posts, tweets, e-mail—some of the most illiterate writing I’ve ever encountered. Let’s even skip the dithering, truncated, poorly reported, trend-chasing, self-reflective confessionals, and disquisitions I read on nine out of ten websites. And while we’re at it, let’s toss all the calumny and gratuitous vituperative in many readers’ “comments.”

So when you say “writing,” I’m going to assume you mean narrative, argument, essay, and so on. And let me narrow this last part of our exchange to the notion of interactive composition. Since I’m working with a cowriter, I suppose you could argue I’m practicing interactive narrative. But that’s a tease. Beth, my cowriter, and I long ago knew that you cannot, should not, blend two personas in one piece or book. A persona is a construct, and it must be singular in its tone, diction, and modes of expression. One speaks with one

voice—politicians notwithstanding—and one writes with one voice. As I've said, that voice can change depending on the subject, theme, and aim of the book. The relationship is between one reader and one persona (or implied author, if you like).

When the first storytellers stood before the fire in the cave, they did so alone. Sure, someone in the corner of the cave may have jumped up during the story to say, "Agnon, you forgot that the woolly mammoth almost got away from us when we ran after him in the swamp grass." "Oh, right," Agnon acknowledged before continuing, "So after we passed through the swamp grass. . . ." Is that interactive? A story is a product of one mind. Yes, narrative is the diurnal currency that all of us use to convey our experience to one another, but a book should have a consistent voice, a stable tone, a lone sensibility. That's what centuries of readers have come to expect. Can you name a masterpiece that was the product of interactive narrative, passing the story back and forth, back and forth.

When Gauguin visited Van Gogh at Arles, he may have advised him on technique, but he did not paint parts of Vincent's canvas for him. The collaborative arts of filmmaking, drama, and so forth aside, our culture thinks of art, fine art, of which literature is a part, as a singular accomplishment, one that embodies the genius and talent of the artist sitting alone with the work.

David Abrahamson is a professor of journalism at Northwestern University's Medill School and secretary of IALJS. His latest book is The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form, which he co-edited with Marcia R. Prior-Miller.



Notes

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