



Above: Author Tracy Kidder.
Photograph by Gabriel Amadeus
Cooney.

Right: Author John D'Agata.

Beyond the Program Era: Tracy Kidder, John D'Agata, and the Rise of Literary Journalism at the Iowa Writers' Workshop

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Abstract: The Iowa Writers' Workshop's influence on literary journalism extends beyond instructional method to its production of two writers who alternately sustained the traditions of the genre and boldly defied them: Tracy Kidder, who forged his career during the heyday of the New Journalism in the early 1970s, and John D'Agata, today's most controversial author challenging the boundaries of literary nonfiction. This essay examines the key works of Kidder and D'Agata as expressions of and reactions to Tom Wolfe's exhortation for a new social realism and literary renaissance fusing novelistic narrative with journalistic reporting and writing. Whereas a great deal of attention has been paid to Iowa's impact on the formation of the postwar literary canon in poetry and fiction, its profound influence on literary journalism within the broader world of creative writing has received little notice. Through archival research, original interviews, and textual explication, I argue that Kidder's narrative nonfiction reinforces Wolfe's conception of social realism, as theorized in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," in sharp contrast to D'Agata's self-reflexive experimentation, toward a more liberally defined category of creative writing. Norman Sims defended literary journalists' immersion in "complex, difficult subjects" and narration "with a voice that allows complexity and contradiction," countering critics who claimed their work "was not always accurate." D'Agata has reopened the debate by exposing the narrative craft's fraught and turbulent relation to fact. That unstable, highly contested struggle remains carefully hidden from view in the smooth veneer of Kidder's traditional aesthetic of literary journalism.

In his 2013 “Notes Toward a Supreme Nonfiction,” Robert S. Boynton praised the power of MFA creative writing programs—fused with journalistic reporting methods—to instruct and inspire the next generation of literary journalists. “The workshop model,” he argued, separates “those who simply love literature from those who want to learn how to write it,” and “guarantees that one’s work is read closely and consistently by one’s colleagues and teachers.”¹ Originally established at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the model has since been widely copied by MFA programs and increasingly adopted by nonfiction writing programs such as Boynton’s own in literary reportage at New York University. This approach has gained prominence because of Iowa’s peerless reputation featuring names like Flannery O’Conner, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Lowell, and Rita Dove.² The workshop’s influence on literary journalism extends beyond instructional method to its production of two writers who alternately sustained the traditions of the genre and boldly defied them: Tracy Kidder, who forged his career under the influence of the New Journalism in the early 1970s, and John D’Agata, today’s most controversial author challenging the boundaries of literary nonfiction. D’Agata’s *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012) brought a firestorm to the quiet prairie by violating the very standards of fact-driven journalistic narrative established by Kidder, his predecessor in the genre, fellow Iowa graduate, and 1982 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner.

Whereas a great deal of attention has been paid to Iowa’s impact on the formation of the postwar literary canon in poetry and fiction, the workshop’s profound influence on literary journalism within the broader world of creative writing has received little notice.³ Prompted by *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl’s powerful exploration of the impact of the rise of creative writing programs on fiction, this study picks up where his leaves off by examining the development of nonfiction at Iowa from its inception in the early 1970s to the present. McGurl argues that Iowa’s elite status brought it an outsized dominance over the publishing industry that directly shaped literary history. In particular, the regimented approach to creative writing instruction from the 1940s through the 1960s had a homogenizing effect on fiction writing, giving rise to the “workshop story”—formally rigid, depersonalized narrative adhering to the New Criticism. The New Journalism went the other direction, as in the “monstrously discursive” rhetorical sprawl of Tom Wolfe.⁴ Kidder’s early-1970s youthful imitation of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* marked the first nonfiction MFA thesis at Iowa boldly defying the workshop’s notorious uniformity. By the 1980s, nonfiction at Iowa embarked on an era of experimentation with the craft that would lead to D’Agata’s new sophistication toward literary journalism, one that arose out of changes in the pro-

gram itself that troubled and radically revised the conventions established by Kidder. Through archival research and original interviews with both authors, this research demonstrates that Kidder's narrative nonfiction functioned as a hinge between the New Journalism and D'Agata's current self-reflexive experimentation, a transition that helped develop a more liberally defined category of creative writing.

Despite the differences dividing them, both Kidder and D'Agata share an emphasis on the creative potential of nonfictional narrative according to a distinctly literary perspective, one that embodies Norman Sims's definition of literary journalism. Sims defended literary journalists' immersion into "complex, difficult subjects" and narration "with a voice that allows complexity and contradiction," countering critics who claimed their work "was not always accurate." Sims rebuked the contention that literary journalists cared more about stylistic flourishes than facts, more about writing than reporting, leading them to produce "flashy, self-serving [prose that] violated the journalistic rules of objectivity."⁵ D'Agata has reopened the debate by exposing the craft's fraught and turbulent relation to fact. That unstable, highly contested struggle remains carefully hidden from view in the smooth veneer of Kidder's traditional aesthetic of literary journalism. How such different writers emerged from the same institutional nexus can be explained historically through changes at Iowa, ones that reveal an increasing sophistication toward the craft of literary journalism.

As the first nonfiction writer trained at Iowa, Kidder represents the earliest era, and D'Agata, who earned his MFA in 1998 and is the current director of the Nonfiction Writing Program, stands for the most recent. The aesthetic preferences of the program during each era had a shaping influence on their careers and the evolution of literary journalism. The following section details the expansive professional networks in the publishing industry for literary journalism that benefitted students in the postwar Iowa Writers' Workshop (1941–1960s) and set the stage for Kidder in 1972. The next considers Kidder's reliance on Iowa's vast professional network, particularly former journalist and Iowa faculty Dan Wakefield, to advance his career. Kidder's troubled first attempts to embody the New Journalism at the workshop were followed by his breakthrough magnum opus *The Soul of a New Machine*, which abandoned the flamboyant bravado of Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson for a gentler aesthetic rooted in John McPhee and the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The final section treats D'Agata's provocative stunt, *Lifespan of a Fact*, coauthored by Jim Fingal, as the most recent iteration of creative nonfiction writing by an Iowa-trained writer, emphasizing his radical departure from and sharp contrast with Kidder's disciplined ap-

proach. A consideration of the generational differences reflected in Kidder's view of D'Agata concludes this study.

Magazine Journalism at the Iowa Writers' Workshop

The journalistic legacy at Iowa inherited by Kidder and D'Agata is deeper than one might suspect, despite the program's ostensible emphasis on the genres of fiction and poetry. Lucrative journalism was a mainstay of the program from its origin, both as a means of professionalizing students and providing them with much needed financial aid. Under Paul Engle, the program took a decidedly professional turn. Engle cultivated an expansive list of powerful connections throughout the periodical press that students regularly benefitted from. In addition to aiding in the placement of student work not limited to only poetry and fiction in learned, elite journals like the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic* and glossy, high-paying venues like *Life* and *Esquire*, Engle's reach extended to figures who "have proven that nonfiction can be art," as one graduate said.⁶ As creative writing professionalized through the mid-twentieth century, it joined forces with magazine journalism, especially through the workshop's influence, thus establishing its place in mass culture.

The workshop built its prestige "to ensure the maintenance of a literary elite," as Loren Glass describes it.⁷ *Esquire* was thus the perfect sponsor for the conference on "The Writer in Mass Culture" since it shared the workshop's aim to foster a highbrow reputation for acclaimed literature while also reaching as many readers as possible on the mass market. Behind this promotional apparatus, the envy of most literary agents and publicists at the time, the workshop's curriculum offered training tailored to the rigors of the market, a "manner of publication without losing too much blood," according to Engle. This was "useful competition that at the same time freed [writers] from the imperatives of the marketplace."⁸

The workshop method, many point out, began with Wilbur Schramm rather than Engle. But under Schramm it bore little resemblance to the rigorous and often cruel peer critiques of student work that took place in the corrugated steel Quonset huts—leftover army barracks from World War Two—next to the Iowa Memorial Union on campus. Indeed, tales of tensions overflowing in this highly competitive environment describe one student blanching while absorbing insults and abruptly rushing out of class to retch on the shores of the Iowa River,⁹ and another of an angry working-class Detroit poet delivering a savage blow to the face of his professor that shattered his glasses.¹⁰ In a private letter, former student Edmund Skellings described an atmosphere in which "most of the social experience was an intense jockeying for status and position within the program."¹¹ The prior genera-

tion by contrast saw Schramm in 1940 leading his workshop sessions literally from his hearth, gathering students into the cozy confines of his home with Shakespeare, his giant sheepdog peacefully snoring by the fire, and his charming four-year-old daughter providing the entertainment.¹²

Engle frequently played the role of literary agent. Former student Charles Embree recalled how “one day at the beginning of class, Paul announced that he had surreptitiously sent a story by one of us to *Esquire*, and that the magazine had bought it.” This, of course, immediately piqued the interest of his charges, now eager to learn who among them had been so lucky. Theatrically building suspense, “Paul waved a check in the air, as proof,” finally revealing that Embree was the author, suggesting “the class adjourn and reassemble at [a nearby bar] for a party on *me*.”¹³ Embree obliged, delighted to be paid for his writing, on the one hand, and in a deeper sense, aware that his appearance in a reputable magazine trafficking in literary subjects would be a boon to his fledgling career. Engle’s *Esquire* connections ran deep. In the 1961 introduction to *Midland: Twenty-five Years of Fiction and Poetry, Selected from the Writing Workshops of the State University of Iowa* he boasted, “The *Esquire Reader*, a collection of ten new writers of fiction, 1960, includes five who are either students or teachers at the fiction workshop.”¹⁴

The workshop’s devotion to magazine journalism was evident in its members’ many publications for *Esquire* and venues like it. Their success was attributable to Engle’s deliberate attempts to mold them into producers for high-end, mass-market journals as a key step toward professionalization. The workshop leveraged magazine writing according to a formula John J. Pauly identifies in which literary journalists “use their articles to capture a publisher’s attention and win lucrative book contracts. In turn, the publishers use magazine articles to gauge the potential marketability of a writer’s work.” As a proving ground for the book publishing market, venues like *Esquire* ushered in serious realistic fiction from the workshop along with the New Journalism’s in-depth nonfiction reporting by the mid 1960s, products that “increasingly look like a hand-made good in an age of mechanical reproduction, an expensive taste that only a few prominent publications can indulge,” according to Pauly.¹⁵ Readers had initially sampled literary journalists such as George Plimpton, Joan Didion, Truman Capote, and Thompson in outlets like *New York*, the *New Yorker*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Harper’s*, and *Rolling Stone* well before their first books appeared.¹⁶

The workshop produced more realistic narrative writing—precisely of the sort Engle so aggressively marketed to *Esquire*—than experimental fiction. As Mark McGurl’s magisterial history of postwar creative writing programs demonstrates, “the dominant aesthetic orientation of the writing program has

been toward literary realism and away from experimentalism we naturally associate with reflexivity.” McGurl explains, “programs like Iowa and Stanford . . . emerged from the richly descriptive regionalist literary movements of the thirties and have remained committed to some version of literary realism ever since.”¹⁷ The era of experimentation in nonfiction, however, emerged in the mid-1980s and reached unprecedented extremes in late 1990s when D’Agata earned his MFA at Iowa. The workshop in these early days actively resisted what Wolfe would later call “puppet-masters” who “were in love with the theory that the novel was a literary game, words on a page manipulated by an author.”¹⁸ Iowa alumnus T. Coraghessan Boyle reported that in a workshop run by the master realist John Cheever, he once started “making noises about ‘experimental writing’ and hailing people like Coover, Pynchon, Barthelme, and John Barth, but Cheever would have none of it.” Cheever retorted that his own writing was experimental, however steeped in verisimilitude and the texture of writerly detail, and that “all good fiction is experimental,” advising the youth, “don’t get caught up in fads.”¹⁹

Kidder at Iowa

In a recent interview with me, Tracy Kidder recalled the circumstance of his entry into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1972. “The workshop was kind of a refuge. I wasn’t all that long back from Vietnam; I was kind of lost. My old professor, Robert Fitzgerald”—Kidder’s undergraduate professor and mentor at Harvard, who had worked as a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*—“got me a sinecure there.” Professional authorship by way of an Iowa degree was Kidder’s response to his “family and the voice in my head at the time [that] said, ‘why don’t you go and figure out how to earn a living.’”²⁰ In an earlier interview, he described his move into the uncharted territory of creative nonfiction during his years at the workshop. He was the first student at Iowa to write literary journalism, whose generic ambiguity in the academy at the time lent him unique freedom and creative license other writers did not have. “One of the nice things about this kind of writing . . . when I was first trying my hand at it in the 1970s, was that it didn’t really have a proper name. It wasn’t part of the academy; no one was teaching courses in it.” He relished the autodidactic nature of the pursuit, and “how you could sort of make it up as you went along,” bringing a distinct “wildness to it.”²¹

Some called his work nonfiction, which he claimed was too stark a word, one designating “the literature of fact, or factual writing.” The other extreme, in his view, was the term “literary journalism,” which overreached for prestige since “it takes a long time to know for sure what really deserves to be called literature.” Thus for some material masquerading under the mantle of liter-

ary journalism, “it sounds a little pretentious, or at least premature, to slap that label on it.” The definition he settled on at the time, which continues to define his work to this day, is “nonfiction writing in which not only the information, but the writing is important,” especially the narrative “techniques of storytelling that never exclusively belonged to fiction,” to which one could add the rhetorical devices and play with words that never exclusively belonged to poetry. Liberated by McPhee’s claim that “no one makes the rules for everybody,” Kidder unleashed his narrative creativity on his subjects that he painstakingly reported. His zeal for dogged reporting—he spent 178 days in a fifth-grade classroom filling 150 steno books with notes for his book *Among School Children*—drove his writing from the beginning.²² But Kidder’s first foray into the investigative world of nonfiction narrative was a disaster.

Kidder learned the craft of creative nonfiction through trial and error. His *The Road to Yuba City: A Journey into the Juan Corona Murders* was the culminating project of his MFA earned at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1974. Vietnam had provided enough wretched experience for one lifetime, making the process of investigating a murder for him “so disgusting” that he purchased the rights to the book from his publisher Doubleday in 1981. He vowed, “I don’t want *The Road to Yuba City* to see the light of day again.”²³ What went wrong? As his editor would later say, “Kidder’s great gift is that he’s not afraid of writing badly.”²⁴ His capacity for retrospectively adjusting his writing according to his errors was essential in the achievement of *The Soul of a New Machine*, his next major project following *The Road to Yuba City*. Ethics were at the heart of his disgust with his first book, particularly his gross valorization of the mind of a killer, a tactic he found intolerable given his experience in Vietnam. “I wrote it in a kind of swashbuckling first person,” he said regretfully. “I think my whole take on that disgusting murder case was wrong in retrospect.”²⁵ Despite this fatal flaw, the book nonetheless established Kidder’s signature immersive method of reporting, which is aptly illustrated in John Coward’s portrayal of the author wearing rags and eating little while engaging in laborious twelve-hour days of fruit-picking from farm to farm to approximate Corona’s itinerant life. He “immersed himself in the project, hopping trains to California, sleeping in flophouses, eating in storefront missions, and hiring out to thin peach trees, a job held by some of Corona’s victims.”²⁶

Notwithstanding such uncompromising reporting methods, Kidder was new to the authorial role and had thus failed to realize his objective of spinning a harrowing yarn was complicated by his use of tone that might shed an implicit ethical judgment on his characters. This is especially true in nonfictional subjects. Thus, Kidder never forgave himself for his neutral casting of a

murderous figure—“the guy was guilty as sin,” Kidder admitted—he deemed beneath contempt. The piece suffers from a first book’s overzealous desire to generate riveting characters overflowing with charisma. As for the portrait of Juan Corona, a serial killer of more than twenty-five migrant farm workers in California during the early 1970s, Kidder concluded, “I just think it’s too heavy handed.”²⁷ The original owner’s release of his rights to Corona’s story first lured Kidder into covering an event that otherwise would not have attracted his attention. The dramatic circumstances that precipitated sudden availability of Corona’s story may have artificially increased its value in Kidder’s eyes. Given his inability to pay his own lawyer, Corona was assigned a public defender before attorney and entrepreneur Richard Hawk made an offer he could not refuse: free legal representation in exchange for the literary rights to the story of convict’s life. Hawk indeed would have retained those rights and commissioned his story for film or print had he not been struck by the moral depravity and sheer ethical travesty of his efforts midway through preparations for trial. Abandoning his plea on behalf of Corona of not guilty by reason of insanity, Hawk fired the psychiatric experts on the case and relinquished his rights to Corona’s life as a literary subject, enabling Kidder to seize the subject. Kidder found ready encouragement to do so from workshop director John Leggett, who was willing to grant him the latitude to write what would become the program’s first-ever nonfiction MFA thesis.

If Corona’s life story was too vile for Hawk, who could clearly see capitalizing on his life as a Faustian deal, it was certainly below Kidder to transform the grisly murders into an action adventure tale told in the first person as a garish and tawdry concession to the lowest common denominator of mass literary culture at the time. Kidder would never forget that lesson, and gravitated toward figures he could uphold for their humanity and nobility. Gifted, passionate, self-sacrificing individuals like Paul Farmer (a doctor with outsized virtue who established a clinic in Haiti) of *The Strength of What Remains* and Tom West of *The Soul of a New Machine* became his focus, who he could complicate by exposing their vulnerabilities and tragic flaws. His treatment of them, further, was tonally balanced; when he broached the topic of their reprehensible traits, he learned to distance himself and withhold his sympathy from the figure. This was crucial, Kidder later explained, because, the writer needs to signal to the reader that “I know this guy is beginning to make you feel uncomfortable. He’s making me feel uncomfortable, too.” Missing from *The Road to Yuba City* was precisely that ethical sensitivity seen in his dedication to the role of “everyman taking you along on this journey” and pausing to reflect on “what I think about my [ethical] discomfort and its causes,” a technique central to *The Strength in What Remains*.²⁸

Since the fiction workshop from 1972 to 1974, when Kidder attended, offered no formal courses in nonfiction writing, he found little in the way of guidance regarding the ethical nuances of nonfiction narrative. In my interview with him, he explained how nonfiction played a much more immediate and rudimentary role of a means of remaining in the program and thus preserving his authorial ambition: “I turned to nonfiction at Iowa not out of inspiration,” but to “be a writer,” since he “just wasn’t turning out fiction.” Terrified and blocked, the young Kidder “was intimidated by the wonderful writing my peers had been turning out.” In retrospect, he acknowledged that nonfiction offered a way “to get out of my own head and look at other people’s lives.” Although he “had been a soldier in Vietnam,” he “hadn’t seen the world,” which immersive journalistic reporting and writing offered. For him, fiction was almost “too solipsistic.” His spirit of adventure drove him to “try something new and see how it works. No one was opposing me, and people were encouraging me.”²⁹ Realizing he could not survive in the world of fiction, he ventured into long-form journalism and nonfiction narrative to save his career.

Kidder’s turn to nonfiction in the face of his “creative well in fiction that was drying up” was prompted in part by Seymour Krim, who “was proselytizing for the New Journalism” at Iowa. Krim had been on staff in 1965 at the *New York Herald Tribune* with Jimmy Breslin, Tom Wolfe, and Dick Schaap, and became well known for his eloquent case on behalf of Jack Kerouac’s place in American literature with his introduction to *Desolation Angels*. Eventually heading the workshop in the 1980s, the charismatic Krim was “a nonfiction writer at Iowa” who “believed” in that genre, exhorting fiction writers to “forget your stories of your dysfunctional families” and pursue literary journalism instead, despite the absence of nonfiction course offerings in the curriculum at the time.³⁰ Since the workshop was not offering any formal education in literary reportage in the early 1970s, Krim’s directive applied to students’ postgraduate careers, as their options at Iowa were limited to poetry or fiction until 1976, when the first nonfiction writing master’s in English was established.

The lack of a nonfiction designation for his MFA degree did not deter Kidder. “Because of my own weaknesses”—feeling intimidated to produce fiction in the brutal, intensely competitive workshop environment, and knowing his well of creativity for fiction had dried up—“the degree was meaningless.” He instead focused on professionalization, reasoning, “Who cares what degrees you have at a publishing house?” Unlike many Iowa MFAs during the 1970s—such as Stephen Wilbers, who went on to earn the PhD—Kidder deemed the publishing world more valuable than academia

in credentialing his professional career. Assuming the agent's role for him just as Engle had for the previous generation of workshop students, Kidder's instructor "[Dan] Wakefield got me through the door at the *Atlantic Monthly* and brought me the most significant contact of my life, a bright young editor named Richard Todd, who I am still working with today."³¹ It was with Todd that he wrote three Vietnam pieces for the *Atlantic*, followed by *The Soul of a New Machine*, which brought him world fame.

Before receiving Todd's much-needed editorial guidance, Kidder lacked confidence in his own work at Iowa. The concentration of great minds there was overwhelming. "I was born in New York City and I thought Iowa City was one of the most cosmopolitan places I'd ever lived," he recalled. That sophisticated atmosphere made him reluctant to subject his writing to the scrutiny of his peers. Although he "presented fiction rather than nonfiction at workshop," he "didn't present very much," because he "got scared," he confessed. What was originally intended as a refuge proved to be an overwhelming pressure cooker of competition. "What was clear to me when I was there was that I was in *very* fast company," he said. Among the "incredibly talented people there, many were already accomplished and it was daunting; it was scary." He did not fit in, because he was "not particularly accomplished" and "pretty confused."³²

"At a certain point Leggett said, 'You have to put something on a worksheet,' since I had been so harsh about other people's writing," Kidder recalled. Workshop sessions proved to be pointless attempts at resurrecting his fiction. He was "still trying to digest the fiction" he had "written on Vietnam" drawn from what he described as "a dreadful novel about the experience I didn't have in Vietnam."³³ The program's flexibility left room to escape this quagmire. "Everything was so loosey-goosey there, even Leggett said, 'We should call this the prose workshop.'" He thus capitalized on the early institutional configuration of the workshop as "a very informal place" in which "no one really cared as far as the requirements went" for the MFA. According to Kidder, "The counsel I got was mainly informal and didn't come in the theater of these workshops, which were really kind of like inquisitions."³⁴

Although he refused to subject his work to the savage criticism of his peers in workshop sessions, Kidder could dish it out with zeal, joining in the sharklike feeding frenzy that consisted of "a dozen young writers in a seminar room, each with a copy of your story" hurling barbs that included "pretentious," "sentimental," "boring," and "Budweiser writing." His acute sense of the inferiority of his own work led him to envy and "disdain them out of self-disdain" and to say "harsh, dismissive things about other students' stories," which towered above his own.³⁵ Once his fiction finally appeared on the

weekly worksheet, those he had wounded relished the opportunity to avenge his cruelty. Leggett had seen this as something of a rite of passage; had Kidder not presented, Leggett is not likely to have loosened program protocol on his behalf to enable his completion of the degree. By allowing Kidder to submit a nonfiction MFA thesis, Leggett was the first director in workshop history (since 1936) to break policy restricting culminating projects exclusively to poetry and fiction. To do so, Leggett used his administrative authority as director to sign as his supervisor despite not actually supervising the project. In fact, no faculty had formally served as Kidder's thesis supervisor. Krim would have been the logical choice, but would not commit. What little faculty guidance Kidder received in the craft of nonfiction writing came from Wakefield.

Alleviating some of Kidder's fear and confusion at Iowa, Wakefield's class presented several limited opportunities to write nonfiction. As Kidder explains, "I did a piece about an Iowa football player and a wheelchair basketball team. Wakefield," the former sports correspondent for the *Indianapolis Star* and regular contributor to *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, and *GQ*, encouraged him. It was not until Kidder inherited a coveted teaching fellowship at the workshop that he finally launched his embedded journalistic work in California for *The Road to Yuba City*. "At Iowa I had a teaching writing fellowship," he notes, "which Leggett handed to me, because the guy who was supposed to get it went absolutely mad. So I had this nifty job there," which provided him a living wage and tuition waver, freeing him to pursue his work on the Juan Corona murders. He "spent a lot of time flying to California. It wasn't so expensive then, and there were no security gates. It was a terrible book" that all this research culminated in, "but I learned a lot," he said. With his MFA thesis that led to *The Road to Yuba City*, Kidder added a second disaster to his other self-described failure—the unpublished novel he toted with him to Iowa about what he "didn't see in Vietnam" that provided fodder for his classmates at fiction workshop bloodlettings.³⁶

Throughout the late 1970s, Kidder recalibrated his craft through indefatigable investigative work for *The Soul of a New Machine*. His writing drew from both Todd's guidance and his understanding of narrative technique learned through his active participation in fiction workshops at Iowa. The book's opening tableau of Tom West, the CEO of Data General, introduces the vital elements of his character we find played out in the ensuing narrative. The details of this portrait all dramatize his leadership qualities on display at Data General. Kidder's expansion of suggestive detail into rich symbolism functioned as a means of compensating for lack of data. "I worried and worried that I didn't know enough about [West], whose special vanity had been to make himself mysterious to me as well as to his team of computer engi-

neers.” Todd advised that West could come to life “partly through suggestive external details, and partly through other characters’ perceptions,” a method he associated with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s fiction. In the absence of facts, Kidder could discern character through such peripheral clues, assuring him, “That’s all right. You can do a *Gatsby* on him.”³⁷

Kidder represents a transition from “Wolfe’s outlandish scenarios and larger-than-life characters [that] leap from the page,” as Boynton describes it, toward McPhee, the figure he cites most as the model for his writing. The hundreds of hardware computer engineers he interviewed for *The Soul of a New Machine* testify to Kidder’s adherence to McPhee’s insistence on “the importance of rigorous reporting on the events and characters of everyday life over turns of bravura in writing style.”³⁸ Although the main figure of the book, Tom West, does appear cast in Ahab-like dimensions of supreme power and will, Kidder’s language is relatively muted, as he submerges his ego while disappearing into his subjects, most of which he draws from the unlikeliest of places typically invisible to mainstream culture. The gentler, more nuanced approach of *Soul* represents a distinct turn away from Wolfe-esque boldness and the grisly gore of *The Road to Yuba City* that drove Kidder to renounce the project he began at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. In that self-consciously pretentious first attempt at Iowa to be “high minded at the time,” Kidder confessed to me, “I was trying to write *In Cold Blood*.”³⁹

Kidder’s capacity to shape real events into novelistic narrative derives from the long history of journalistic expression liberated from the shackles of the impossible standard of absolute reportorial objectivity.⁴⁰ To establish the firm presence of the reporter’s experience and voice yet still adhere to the facts was Kidder’s approach in *The Soul of a New Machine*. His seamless, well-mannered storytelling would transform throughout an era of innovation in the 1980s at Iowa that gave rise to D’Agata’s radical renovation of nonfiction to show that “it can be as lyrical, as fragmented, as self-interrupting, and as self-conscious as the most experimental fiction or verse.” His approach, as James Wood describes it, would be to “refuse to yield to the idea of nonfiction as stable, fixed, already formed.”⁴¹

The Rise of Experimental Nonfiction at Iowa

D’Agata’s emphasis on art in the space of nonfiction marks the latest stage in the evolution of the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program (NWP). It was not until 1976 that a graduate degree program in nonfiction writing was officially introduced. But as Kidder’s experience in the workshop suggests, a groundswell of interest in literary journalism at Iowa had surfaced by 1972 under the influence of *Herald Tribune* New Journalist Seymour Krim. Also

encouraging the development of nonfiction writers at Iowa in the early 1970s was workshop director John Leggett. As a former editor at *Harper's*, Leggett held a broader view of the publishing industry at the time than his predecessor, the poet George Starbuck, whose concerns were more limited to poetry and fiction. Enthusiasm for nonfiction, sparked by the New Journalism's rise to prominence in the mid-1960s, inspired a new surge of interest in college courses and the writing of nonfiction. Buoyed by the cultural prominence of the New Journalism and this rising popularity of nonfiction among readers and students, a group of six professors formed the Iowa nonfiction program in 1976, an all-purpose "Master of Arts in English/Expository Writing" geared toward students' professional interests. Some students earned the degree to pursue technical and business writing careers, while others prepared for occupations as professional authors and journalists in the magazine and book industries. The first MA/W degrees earned at that time included projects on the personal essay, film reviews, memoir, and literary criticism. Fiction and poetry no longer held a generic monopoly at Iowa due to the responsiveness to New Journalism by faculty such as Wakefield and students such as Kidder. The NWP now consistently takes the top spot in annual rankings of the more than 150 similar programs published in *Poets and Writers*.⁴²

Carl Klaus, whose interest in destabilized authorial subjectivity appears in *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*, made his imprint on the program when he assumed directorship in 1985. He established its exclusive focus on literary nonfiction, eliminating film reviews and literary criticism in the MA/W curriculum. Conventional memoir became reimagined as a reflective art under the radically aestheticized category of the essay. Klaus pioneered an emphasis on "the conflict between the expression of the literal truth and a striving for literary effect," especially how "the first person singular is invariably a *persona* whose existence depends on literary performance." His reinvention in the 1980s of the traditional memoir to absorb the "reportorial, scenic, experimental, meditative, informative," and activist elements of creative nonfiction encouraged the next generation of the 1990s to "recount stories in a poetic, figurative prose that results in a hybrid" known as the lyric essay.⁴³ D'Agata led that movement into the 1990s with a vision of the lyric essay as "taking the subjectivity of the personal essay" that Klaus's generation had developed and renovated, "and the objectivity of the public essay" associated with newspaper and magazine journalism, "and conflate them into a literary form that relies on art and fact," drawing extensively on the reporter's tools of observation, argumentation, and perception.⁴⁴

In the 1990s, students read pioneers in the art of reflective nonfiction, including Montaigne and Swift, Didion and Orwell, Nancy Mairs and E.B.

White.⁴⁵ The program soon established a reputation for personal narratives marked by reflective meditative prose, drawing the ire of Iowa's journalism school, which alleged it was too introspective and thus blind to audience. But such charges were dispelled when the program transformed into the NWP and began publication of three leading journals focusing exclusively on nonfiction prose, *Creative Nonfiction* (1993), *Fourth Genre* (1999), and *River Teeth* (1999). Its star students, such as Jon Anderson, furthermore, had come from careers in journalism. Anderson recalls a chance meeting with Klaus in Iowa City at Prairie Lights Bookstore while he was still employed at the *Chicago Tribune*. He recalled how Klaus "more or less ordered me to pull together a collection of my *Chicago Tribune* columns and send them to him." He enrolled in the program, and "the rest is *City Watch: Discovering the Uncommon Chicago*, my first book," noting that "the dream of any journalist is to go deeper in their writing and the Nonfiction Writing Program helped me make that turn."⁴⁶ "Borders," Anderson's 1990 thesis, developed out of Bill Murray's course, *The Literary Journalists*, "which was aimed squarely at [attempts] to move beyond the flatness of contemporary feature writing and shape facts into a form that would, in the words of Tom Wolfe, look at experience through 'the eye sockets' of the people involved, speaking in their own voices, as if the narrator knew their thoughts or feelings." The course's objective, and inspiration of Anderson, aptly illustrates Iowa's obsession with closing the gap between subjectivity and object in literary journalism.⁴⁷

D'Agata's epiphany as a student at Iowa in the late 1990s is telling of this trajectory toward the examination of perception itself. His instructor took his NWP class on a field trip to dissect eyeballs of cows, a gruesome task that had them fingering "a bunch of jelly and nerves" beneath which they discovered "a perfectly clear agate lens." Holding them up, they "could see through the cow's eyes." Then it dawned on him as to "how powerful and absolutely gorgeous perception really is. . . . But at the same time we all realized they were flawed and fundamentally different." He realized that "what we were seeing was something we'd never really be able to understand, but would nonetheless try to capture . . . for the rest of our lives as writers." Tellingly, through the realization of the radical discontinuities of vision, he came into being as a writer "exhilarated by the challenges of the craft."⁴⁸

By D'Agata's entrance into the NWP as a student in 1996, the craft issues that dominated discussion focused on highly problematizing and questioning received static notions of the self in first-person narratives, particularly as a means of exploring creative boundaries. He was the leader in experimental forms of nonfiction at the time, reinventing the lyric essay as a nonlinear pastiche of interview transcripts, reportage, excerpted primary sources, and prose

notable for its subtle poetic lyricism. He graduated in 1998, four years after the NWP began offering an MFA exclusively in literary nonfiction. His MFA thesis, "Round Trip," was his attempt to write his version of Joan Didion's "At the Dam." "I loved that essay," he recalled, to the extent that "when I was younger I wanted to be that essay—not just to have written it but to be able to inhabit it, like drag, to feel its sentences so intimately inside me that the power of Didion's prose might somehow cause an infection."⁴⁹

The issue of participant-observer balance was central to the formation of literary journalism in the works of Jo Ann Beard and Will Jennings. David Torrey Peters first wrote "The Bamenda Syndrome" for an MFA at Iowa in 2000, a piece that foregrounds his struggles with empathy and doubt in his reportage suppressed from "an earlier skeletal version" written "as though I were some detached journalist with complete faith in his own ability to collect the who, what, when, where, and why with calm professionalism."⁵⁰ Other issues central to the pursuit of literary journalism drove the best work produced during D'Agata's era, including Hope Edelman's, which emphasizes the complexity of narrative persona, and Michele Morano's, which experiments with the compression of time in narration. Morano's reflection on her composition process offers a powerful mediation on how the danger of "letting your imagination run off with real life" and straying from chronology and lived detail can be detrimental to the story's authenticity.⁵¹ Her discoveries can be seen as an apt check on precisely the ethical transgressions of *Lifespan*.

D'Agata's influence on the program in the late 1990s bears his unmistakable concern for radical experimentation with the form. His prominence in the program traces back to his status as its first major author since the inception of the nonfiction MFA in 1994 and extends to his current position as its director. The perennial leader in graduate nonfiction programs, Iowa admits twelve students annually seeking the privilege of learning the craft under prominent faculty that have including Geoff Dyer, Mary Ruefle, Lia Purpura, and Bernard Cooper. Its alumni include National Book Critics award winner Eula Biss, known for *Notes from No Man's Land* and Yiyun Li, PEN/Hemingway award winner for *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. Many have gone on to teach in creative writing programs; NWP graduate John Price (*Daddy Long Legs*) is currently the director of the program in creative writing at the University of Nebraska. These powerful authors all build on the tradition originally set by Karl Klaus when he took over as director in 1985. Klaus was one of the original members of Iowa's Expository Writing Committee, which set the groundwork for the NWP. The NWP now reflects D'Agata's defiance of conventional journalistic categories by encouraging an active reconsideration of the status of facts and narrative perspective.

“I’ll Be the Lamb”

John D’Agata’s *The Lifespan of a Fact* shows a new sophistication in relation to the craft of literary journalism that first arose out of the NWP when he was a student there in the 1990s. The controversy about the book reflected the latest stage in the evolution of the NWP itself, suggesting the distance between its origins in Kidder’s McPhee-inspired narrative journalism and D’Agata’s experimentation influenced by authors such as David Foster Wallace. Wallace, like D’Agata, developed a complex philosophical system by which to reconfigure conventional journalistic reporting and writing, allowing for higher levels of literary expression. But when this pattern of radical reconfiguration of conventional reporting reached unprecedented heights with the *Lifespan* controversy of 2012, concerns surfaced about its impact on the program’s student body, which typically drew figures like Jon Anderson from legacy media. “I’m afraid we’ve alienated traditional journalists from our program,” said D’Agata’s concerned colleague Robin Hemley, a former NWP director.⁵²

The main concerns of that controversy align with the latest craft issues from the NWP pertaining to consciousness and perception. D’Agata seeks a “type of contingent truth” Josh Roiland associates with Wallace, one that acknowledges the consciousness of the reporter that filters the subjects presented on the page.⁵³ D’Agata’s connection to Wallace runs deep. Wallace used his authority to help promote D’Agata’s *Halls of Fame* (2003) with a blurb that praised him as “one of the most significant writers to have emerged in the last few years,” claiming “his essays combine the innovation and candor of David Shields and William Vollman with the perception and concinnity and sheer aesthetic weight of Annie Dillard and Lewis Hyde.”⁵⁴ D’Agata radically expands on what John Pauly describes as literary journalism’s resistance to conventional journalism’s unselfconscious reliance on “facts’ to justify their stories.” In the process, he debunks the realism of nonfiction and its attendant “fact-fetish” to acknowledge that facts are deployed rhetorically. As such, he aims to “free the literary from its earthly entrapments” and in the process illustrate how “all writing is a matter of social negotiation.”⁵⁵

The Lifespan of a Fact details such social negotiation in D’Agata’s struggle to maintain control—in many cases willfully defending what he knows are inaccuracies—of his story of sixteen-year-old Levi Presley’s July 2002 Las Vegas suicide. His nemesis is his fact checker, Jim Fingal of *The Believer*, a journal specializing in nonfiction. The burlesque of D’Agata’s egocentric author defending his original inaccuracies for the sake of literary effect plays off of the narrow rule-following Fingal through their contentious sophomoric email correspondence. The correspondence alternately functions as comic relief and

metadata set against the grim narrative of Levi's death and the trial faced by the youth's survivors in the aftermath. Justifications for D'Agata's alterations give way to other instances in the correspondence where Fingal aptly accuses D'Agata of sloppy reporting and laziness. The exchange dramatizes the tensions in what Jan Whitt calls "settling the borderland" of nonfiction. In that borderland, "news is not a collection of facts" nor merely "the recording of a source's words or chronological events," because "within human events, meanings propel other events and governing philosophies into relation with a particular community."⁵⁶

Despite D'Agata's claim that he and Fingal had alerted readers through the media about the embellishment of the original correspondence to exaggerate their characters, many took it as authentic. If Wikipedia is any indication, the state of common knowledge on the subject currently calls it "a real-life exchange" that was a "heated seven-year battle" over "whether it is appropriate to change facts in writing that is both nonfiction and art."⁵⁷ Proceeding under this widely held assumption, Jennifer B. McDonald of the *New York Times Book Review*, for example, called D'Agata "a wolf in journalist's clothing, recklessly blowing off facts as if they were so much dandelion fluff antithetical to his stated purpose of essaying the Truth." This "self-appointed ambassador of the essay" was "playing God" while "inviting us down a slippery slope" into "hogwash."⁵⁸ The uproar drew extensive input from such influential commentators as Mike Daisey and Dinty W. Moore. Online discussion boards lit up with guardians of traditional journalism opposing the avant garde. "What concerns me," Moore wrote, "is that he has gone so public, so big, so 'in your face' aggressive about his lofty goals to create a new art space." Like McDonald, Moore made a one-to-one correlation between the condescending egomaniac "John" of *Lifespan* and D'Agata himself.⁵⁹ None of these critics, McDonald included, took exception to his immersive and painstaking reporting methods. McDonald actually praised how "he immersed himself in a place, got to know its people, consulted documents, recorded his impressions, [and] turned his material into a narrative."⁶⁰

Jack Shafer of Reuters, a journalistic mainstay, came to D'Agata's defense, arguing that long before this "literary provocateur" had begun altering dates, fusing quotes, changing statistics to seek a truth but not necessarily accuracy, "Truman Capote was doing the same in his most famous work, 1966's *In Cold Blood*." Shafer highlighted the long history of readers spotting errors and inconsistencies with the historical record in Capote's book that he defended as an "immaculately factual" nonfiction novel. Immediately after the publication of *In Cold Blood*, Philip K. Thompkins published "In Cold Fact" in *Esquire*, exposing Capote's liberties with the historical record.⁶¹ Capote

repeatedly denied mounting evidence and allegations for decades, often with brash arrogance. He insisted he was above stooping to petty distortions that might sully six years of painstaking researching and reporting for “a book, the point of which is factual accuracy,” as he told George Plimpton. D’Agata, on the other hand, not only admitted, but also vigorously defended the method of adjusting existing facts in literary nonfiction as long as such alterations are noted to the reader, and that no facts are invented from scratch. “What separates D’Agata . . . from Capote is his candor in interviews about his manipulations,” Shafer revealed, a point corroborated in my February 2012 email interview with D’Agata.⁶² “Jim and I have been quite vocal about the constructed nature of our exchange, but I guess that’s less interesting to some critics who just want to call me a jerk,” he wrote, resigning himself to being sacrificed on the altar of traditional journalism: “So be it. I’ll be the lamb.”⁶³

Shafer argues that D’Agata’s project “is harmless” given his disavowal of traditional journalistic standards. The harm in Capote’s book lies in its wide acceptance as a model of complete reportorial accuracy despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary that has since been lost to literary history or willfully forgotten. Admired for achieving such a compelling novelistic narrative while remaining firmly grounded in unaltered evidence, *In Cold Blood* “continues to be taught in journalism classes, is celebrated as a masterpiece, and I would guess it has been read by fifty percent of Americans who consider themselves educated,” Shafer observes.⁶⁴ While “What Happens There,” the essay reproduced in the center of each page of *The Lifespan of a Fact*, does not invent dialogue or fabricate scenes that did not actually occur, the exchange between D’Agata and Fingal went further.

In response to my question about how much, if any, of that correspondence had been invented, D’Agata confirmed it was mostly a constructed elaboration of an exchange that actually occurred. “But yes, it’s a performance,” he explained. “It’s certainly based on arguments we had throughout the fact-checking process, but the exchange in the book is a bit of an exaggerated farce, to be sure. . . . In a book about the importance of construction in literature (be it in poetry, fiction, or especially nonfiction), our discussion of that argument was intentionally constructed.”⁶⁵ D’Agata’s deliberately deceptive presentation of that discussion is the book’s Achilles heel. Unlike most facts D’Agata alters, which he discloses to the reader, the embellishment of the correspondence was not transparent. Readers interested in seeing that original exchange had no access to it. Archiving it online or including it in an appendix would have sufficed in the manner of his “Note to Readers” at the end of *About a Mountain* (2010), which details his precise departures from facts. Disclosure of the actual correspondence might have functioned as an

additional layer of self-reflexive irony by glossing or *footnoting a footnote*, a move worthy of Wallace himself given his endless fascination with the expressive potential of the footnote. Herein lies perhaps *Lifespan's* deepest flaw: its failure to disclose the vast extent—so vast it dangerously bridges on outright fiction—to which the framing device of the email exchange between author and fact-checker was “constructed.”

This stunt represents the latest and most reckless of D’Agata’s signature moves designed to establish his nonfiction as art, a point he emphasizes in the “To the Reader” address of *The Next American Essay* (2003): “I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts.”⁶⁶ In one sense, this prioritization of aesthetics evades responsibility to the factual record. In another, it resonates with the aim to “narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object, not divorce them,” as John C. Hartsock has said of literary journalism’s special access to intimacy that lends it its unique power to engage the reader.⁶⁷ Literary journalism’s evolution toward narrowing the gap—rather than widening, as in conventional journalism—between subjectivity and the object has been an ongoing pursuit in nonfiction writing at Iowa.

Kidder on D’Agata

Our November 2015 conversation marked the first occasion that Kidder had heard of the D’Agata’s *Lifespan* controversy, which he curtly dismissed as a mere “tempest in a teapot.” He was also unaware that D’Agata had taken over as director of the NWP. Upon hearing it, he sarcastically quipped, “good luck with that,” and bristled defensively, “at Iowa nonfiction is nowhere near as high-powered as the workshop in fiction and poetry.”⁶⁸ His better judgment, instilled by McPhee’s dictum that “nobody makes the rules for everyone,” then softened him. “I have no beef with D’Agata, just a philosophical difference,” he said, before adding, “you don’t overtly lie” in the space of nonfiction.⁶⁹

Despite being unaware of the 2012 controversy, Kidder nonetheless found another occasion to rebuke D’Agata in his 2013 book *Good Prose*, in this case for “fictionalizing” in *About a Mountain*. Kidder warns against “substituting made-up dates for real ones,” noting “the large risk of fictionalizing is a loss of faith by both writer and reader.” He takes D’Agata to task for his endnote to *About a Mountain*, which indicates to the reader that the narrative depicted “over a single summer” compressed his actual time there, which was much longer. This is “for dramatic effect only,” and with full disclosure of “each instance” in the text. Changes in character names and the combining of “a number of subjects into a single composite ‘character’”—John Hersey,

Truman Capote, and long before them Henry David Thoreau have used both time compression and composite techniques—are also noted in the text.⁷⁰ Kidder elaborated on his published denunciation of this practice, alleging, “I think he’s not writing nonfiction.”⁷¹ As McPhee taught him, “There’s lots of artistry, but you don’t make things up.” Instead, Kidder suggests, the nonfiction writer should do his or her best “to reconstruct a story” and “chase after accuracy.” The inevitability of subjectivity, he argues, does not mean that it should become a “disinhibiting drug” that “absolves them of responsibility.”⁷² In speaking with me, he was even more candid in his condemnation of D’Agata. “When you’re telling stories you can do a lot of things with time,” he said, “but I don’t think you can overtly lie about something.”⁷³

D’Agata is not the first to have risked inaccuracy in the quest for intimacy missing from traditional journalism. Prominent literary journalists such as Jacqui Banaszynski and Gay Talese warn against the use of a tape recorder for the same reason cited by D’Agata—it can present a barrier to intimacy. Banaszynski argued that “a tape recorder can be as intrusive as a reporter’s notebook.” Further, the discrepancy between recorder and notes is unavoidable since “the notes I record are closer to proper grammar, though the person did not say them exactly that way.” Talese goes further to suggest traditional reporting methods with notes and recorder obscure and often misrepresent the essence of the subject. “I do not use a tape recorder,” he confessed, not because of laziness, but because it detracts from his access to “what the other person is thinking,” and his own capacity “to see the world from that person’s view.” Like D’Agata, Talese is adamant that “The exact words people say don’t necessarily capture their view, especially when you have a tape recorder working.”⁷⁴

Talese’s objective resonates with D’Agata’s project of “getting to know people, hanging out with them and listening to them” without the interference of recording devices or notepads. This process is integral to “making them into verifiable” rather than wholly invented “characters.” D’Agata’s radical pursuit of intimacy with his subjects through such immersive reporting techniques suggests a deeper core principle—paradoxically consonant with older approaches like Talese’s—behind the comic hyperbole of his role as provocateur self-righteously defending “this genre [from] being terrorized by an unsophisticated reading public that’s afraid of accidentally venturing into terrain that can’t be footnoted and verified by seventeen different sources.”⁷⁵ Despite glaring generational differences in their approaches to nonfiction craft, Kidder and D’Agata share a deep and abiding commitment to accessing human subjectivity through immersive reporting. Reflecting their respective generation’s nonfiction at Iowa, Kidder’s traditional data-gathering routines

that render polished narrative established the foundation for D'Agata's non-orthodox reporting and writing that exposes the machinery behind the wings of the finished product. Aesthetic technique as a hedge against limited facts, even for Kidder, was essential to his craft. To "do a Gatsby," as he and his editor Todd called the essential technique that unlocked the main character of the work that would go on to win the National Book Award, was to engage in the novelist's art for a nonfiction narrative worthy of Fitzgerald himself.

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Notes

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Special Collections. Faculty and graduates of the workshop have won twenty-eight Pulitzer Prizes (including two recent ones, in 2005 and 2010) since 1947, in addition to numerous National Book Awards. Its sole Pulitzer and National Book Award for general nonfiction went to Tracy Kidder in 1982 for *The Soul of a New Machine*: “UI Pulitzer Prize Winners,” <http://www.iowalum.com/pulitzerPrize/>.

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