



Australian literary journalism scholar Sue Joseph. Photography by Hans Bool

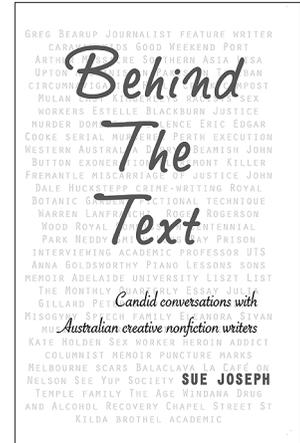
The Implications of Genre in Nonfiction

Behind the Text: Candid Conversations with Australian Creative Nonfiction Writers
By Sue Joseph. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers. Paperback, 250 pp., AUD\$29
(US\$22)

Reviewed by Martha Nandorfy, University of Guelph, Canada

This new book of interviews featuring ten writers (twelve, counting a couple of writing partners) aims to fill a gap Sue Joseph sees in Australian thinking about the genre of creative nonfiction, and while the conversations specifically address that practice and reception in decidedly Australian terms, they potentially all contain something of interest to readers, practitioners, teachers, and critics of nonfiction everywhere. Joseph describes her approach to crafting the story of these conversations as meta-narrative, “a creative nonfiction rendering of research about and interviews conducted with the authors (x).” She structures the interviews around a central question: do authors think their work belongs to the genre of creative nonfiction and, if not, can she get them to acknowledge the usefulness of doing so? Now, a non-Australian interviewer might have been discouraged by the flak and even belligerent responses to these questions, but Joseph seems to anticipate the rift between academics’ and practitioners’ objectives, and with unflagging good humor and stamina she pursues this line of questioning even as she repeatedly hits the same wall. The good thing is that she ricochets off on fascinating tangents that, given her grace and intuition, allow her subjects to explore their ideas, however tentatively. Since she pretty much demands an answer to this question, her subjects cannot easily fall into simply repeating what they are accustomed to saying about their work.

In her introduction, Joseph considers how influential American critics like Norman Sims and John Hartsock trace the evolution of categories such as literary journalism, narrative literary journalism, narrative descriptive journalism, terms often coined by the writers themselves as Capote and Wolfe did to publicize their own inventiveness. This cultural comparison really captures the Australian difference since all of Joseph’s subjects resist being labeled, most charging that categories only serve academics. Joseph, however, will not be dissuaded: “I make no apologies—I am an academic. But I enjoy very much the term ‘creative nonfiction.’ I know what it is, and I champion it as a term to be recognized and regarded in Australia,” though she also asserts that these writings are already highly regarded despite lacking a label (xvi). She draws from her classroom experience to find shared reader response as the basis for categorizing this genre: she asks students to think of nonfiction stories they’ve read



and to consider “which ones evoke a narrative that they can remember because of its cinematic qualities; which can they remember as a film in their heads,” leading her to assert: “I believe it is the experience of reading that defines nonfiction as literary and creative (xvi).” This might suggest that Joseph’s methodology of interviewing practitioners rather than readers is skewed from the start, but true to her stated meta-narrative style, she allows her thinking to roam and evolve across the pages instead of editing out any contradictions. And so on the very next page, she switches her focus to the power of writing that elicits this reader response: “I believe it is writing that envelops intellect, analysis, empathy and grace. An open mind that is able to analyse impartially; empathy of the author. Empathy with grace, leaving judgement behind . . . but it must be met with rigorous fact checking and analysis to make it verifiable and credible (xvii).” And here, I should self-identify as a literary critic and theorist, since the interdisciplinary nature of our interests is what makes reviews and conferences productive. From my perspective, it would be worthwhile to examine how the specific writing strategies and techniques of this genre elicit reader responses, instead of just jumping from one idea to another and leaving fragmentary impressions but, admittedly, these do accumulate from chapter to chapter forming a cogent if not definitive sense of genre.

Joseph clearly maps out how genres relate to each other, and I find her introductory statement particularly helpful for understanding the difference between literary journalism and creative nonfiction even as the actual writings evolve, become hybridized, and are always several steps ahead of criticism and theory. She says: “So my model is that the umbrella term of creative nonfiction sits at the top, below which are the sub-genres: true crime writing, memoir, profile, essay, literary journalism, historical nonfiction, journal writing, food writing, travel writing, found poetry (nonfiction poetry), documemoir (xvii).” While I like how inclusive Joseph’s paradigm is, she does not include “life writing,” which in the case of younger writers, especially, might be more appropriate than “memoir” and also captures the process of writing about/in the present, and can include food and travel, which in themselves seem too narrow.

One substantially different interview is with Aboriginal writer Doris Pilkington Garimara (whose work many around the globe know from the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*). Unfortunately, this conversation doesn’t flesh out the particularly important insights of Aboriginal storytelling around truthfulness (as opposed to Truth), collective memory, and autohistory. In other words, Aboriginal storytelling is not just an ethnic variant of nonfiction but has a long history as the source and vehicle of all knowledge and teaching in oral and written/pictorial forms, also imbued with the power of healing and worldmaking. It is clear that Joseph conducted preliminary research on this writer and her community, perhaps Aboriginal–white settler histories, and also pondered how to approach what she sees as ultimately a story about mothers and daughters. Pilkington Garimara’s response to Joseph’s central query about the terms “creative non-fiction,” “literary journalism,” and “long-form narrative” suggests that for this storyteller, the question of genre is more irrelevant than it is to most of the other practitioners: “I don’t know,” she says, trying not to disappoint me, “but I’ve been an Indigenous or an Aboriginal writer for years. I’m honoured to

carry that label because it’s what I’m known by overseas: the Aboriginal writer, or the Indigenous writer that’s from Australia. That’s me’ (40).” This is a very different kind of life story given the Aboriginal experience of colonization and cultural and literal genocide. As Margaret Simons notes in another interview, “One of the things I learned through Hindmarsh Island and elsewhere with Aboriginal people is you have to take much more time and allow them to interview you before you try and ask any direct questions . . . the whole idea of asking a question and expecting to be entitled to an honest answer is sort of culturally strange to them (124).” This interview would have been more compelling had Joseph’s preliminary research also prepared her to encounter the kinds of stories that exceed European limitations of reason and realism. Allowing Pilkington Garimara to set the parameters around Aboriginal storytelling, which embodies many complex ideas that can be theorized in relation to genre, might have led to more pertinent questions about the relationship among stories, land (country as they say in Australia), and collective experience.

Though the focus is always on the writer, Joseph’s gaze and voice situates her in each interview. Her personality shines through in the acuteness of her observations, her humor and ability to register silences and read between the interviewees’ lines and body language. For example, she starts the first interview story *in medias res*, that is, we don’t know right away that she and her class are skyping Paul McGeough in Kabul, Afghanistan: “He looms on the screen at the front of the classroom, bleary-eyed and scruffy. His hair is dishevelled and since I saw him last, he has grown a sizeable beard—greyish and wild. He is wearing a grey T-shirt which he has obviously slept in, and it seems we woke him up (1).” She alternates this kind of immediate contact with narrating her approach to a particular location, especially if it is off the beaten tracks of urban centers. In those cases, she paints the landscape, inviting us to imagine that we accompany her, Tessa, her daughter who often joins her, and the always present but surreptitious “Dutchman” with the camera, Hans Bool, Joseph’s significant other (as we only find out in the acknowledgments). An interesting strategy that Joseph uses to get more insight out of her interviewees is to let them choose the meeting place, which always reveals something about their sense of place, a scene they might belong to, their taste in food and drink. For example, the Pepper Café, where she meets with Simons, also reveals an odd historical detail given that above its threshold are the words: “Girdwood’s Hygienic Library,” harking back to the nineteenth-century belief that books carried disease, hence this former library’s practice of wiping them down with formaldehyde.

McGeough, the first writer interviewed in *Behind the Text*, sets the challenge Joseph will face from here on in. He seems not to understand the question of whether he is writing creative nonfiction or literary journalism, or at least fails to see it as relevant. After Joseph reminds him of his vivid description of running toward the 9/11 explosions, he says, perplexed, “But that’s just reporting. . . .” Joseph humors her reader, saying that “He seems intent on being obtuse. . . (5).” But McGeough will not be cowed into admitting that his writing is more artful than journalistic reportage, and furthermore he attributes this to an Australian cultural attitude that smacks of macho pragmatism: “. . .when you say are you a literary journalist, you think ‘Give

me a fuckin' break,' you know, because some people will never accept that journalism is an art; they will tell you it's a craft. I think the sense amongst Australian journalists, if you dare to sit down on any bar stool in this country and say: 'Well, actually I'm a literary journalist,' is that you'd get hit, so you wouldn't do it." In slightly less threatening terms, he suggests "you'd be laughed off the floor (8)." Here we start to get a sense of an Australian attitude that Joseph locks horns with. She's determined to make "creative nonfiction" stick, a determination that must also be an Australian attitude, but it all makes for good fun and yields fascinating insights into relationships and writing. Instead of becoming frustrated or reading something into McGeough's obtuse practicality, Joseph exercises her meta-narrative technique to underscore just how practical McGeough has to be to get his job done. Most readers are probably with her when she has to ask him what a Pelican box is. His answer says much more than the objects he enumerates: "What's in the Pelican boxes? Let me see . . . all sorts of shit." After listing electronic devices, a bulletproof vest, and the various jerry-rigging uses of baggage straps, he says, "If I'm in a high-rise hotel and I've got to fashion a platform that hangs off the balcony or out the window to put the satellite on. . . (18)." Joseph ends this section without comment, a loud silence inviting her reader to speculate on why such a reporter/writer might not give too much thought to theorizing genre.

While David Leser's career covers different kinds of journalism, including documentary film, he is well known as a profile writer. It is in this third chapter that it dawns on me that Joseph is also writing profiles. I remember that often I unconsciously start to imitate the style of the author I write about, and think that in an interview situation, that empathetic contagion must be even stronger. In Leser's case, Joseph foregrounds an action that gives insight into his personality and priorities: phone calls from his daughter that he always takes, interrupting the interviews, and speaking warmly to her. He stresses his parenting role and how it determined where to settle in order to be a full-on father in what he calls a working/home environment. In an unusual (creative?) move for an interviewer, Joseph actually tells Leser about how during her own cadetship in the *Daily Telegraph* newsroom, Leser was perceived to be a shoo-in because of his father's status as a media mogul. She reveals having some kind of history with other interviewees as well, showing in a performative way how integrity works through this kind of honest disclosure. Again, classifying texts into genres is seen as overthinking, though Leser figures that critics' need to do this in order to organize anthologies can't be a bad thing. He outright challenges Joseph, refusing to think about himself as categorized in creative nonfiction: "I just think of myself as a journalist and a storyteller," which the persistent Joseph thinks "seems to be the end of that discussion, for the moment (50–51)." Leser chooses another question as key, given that, as he says, the older he gets the more he realizes the importance of relationships and community: "Does the story you are telling serve that (53)?" This conversation takes us from formal conventions and literary techniques to consider political community engagement as a criterion, progressively opening up the complexity triggered by Joseph's question, as we take this Australian tour with her.

One of the best interviews is with Kate Holden, author of the memoir *In My Skin*, which is about her five-year experience of being addicted to heroin and support-

ing her habit through sex work. In the first lines of this profile, Joseph notes impressions that delve below the surface: "There is a gentle fragility surrounding author Kate Holden. Or perhaps a canny wariness. It is not directed outward but rather inwards, towards herself. At herself (67)." Given that Holden writes "regularly and seemingly affectionately" about her needle marks, Joseph starts the interview by bluntly asking to see them. She refrains from explaining this move to her reader, and while it's a gamble to charge at Holden's fragile countenance, yet it seems to work. Sequencing the stages of information gathering, it turns out that Joseph had already "confessed" to Holden, on first contact over the phone, that she grew up with a heroin addict (though she doesn't identify the family member). Again, Joseph's rejection of the pretense of distanced objectivity in favor of empathetic understanding is clearly productive.

Holden consciously deviates from memoirs "about absolution or resolving shame," instead invoking her authorial control over reality: "This is what it's like, this is what happened to me and I'm not ashamed about it (86)." This interview includes an extended conversation about the differences between memoir and autobiography, and the reasons for writing about what others might assume to be negative experiences related to some kind of failure: "I really strongly believe that you don't disavow what happens to you (71)." This is also one of the most philosophical interviews, given that Holden doesn't "really believe in the plausibility of the world. So for me it's all material, it's all like looking at a book (76)." She gives insights into why there is such a demand for this kind of nonfiction, although her terms are ambiguous—"sense of the authentic"; "what appears to be authentic"—which demonstrate Holden's suspicions about authenticity without analyzing them further. She does broaden the scope, however, from the reader's need to identify with the writer's experiences to thinking about how in a culture of artifice and political misinformation, where people feel atomized, nonfiction gives a sense of corroboration and collaboration with other people (85). Having written in explicit detail about her sex work raises questions about protecting her family from knowledge that might traumatize them. Fortunately for Holden, her parents' lasting reaction to her writing is not shame or disavowal but pride in their daughter. In answer to Joseph's burning question of genre, Holden is uncertain about the modifier "creative." Though she doesn't have a better one, she dislikes its association with "made-up" and wishes for a term to capture how her writing "is more engaged with the exploratory nature of that kind of nonfiction (85)." The unexpected aspects of situations we might not have much knowledge about make this particular interview especially surprising. For example, our unexamined assumptions about sex workers might be rattled by the fact that Holden was sacked from both her jobs in brothels "for being a union loudmouth, for standing up for the rights of the workers," and recalling this with infectious joy and laughter shared with Joseph.

At the beginning of her conversation with John Dale, Joseph is implicated as actor and not interviewer. This colleague, mentor, boss, and friend gives a speech to launch one of her previous books, *Speaking Secrets*. Here Joseph draws the reader's attention to how she sequences events for narrative impact: "But this launch was after I interviewed him for this text. Our interview was blunt—possibly because we have a history—and I now wonder about what he says about betrayal during his

launch speech as I begin this chapter (94).” What Dale says about betrayal relates to the dynamics of the interview in general, and how the writer controls and arranges language in the retelling: “words are omitted, intentions changed, adjectives added or embellished” can seem like a betrayal. This segment of Dale’s speech is ambivalent because he draws no direct connection between representation (how the interviewer narrates or stories the interview instead of transcribing the dialogue verbatim), and the interviewer’s integrity and honesty as a writer.

Joseph’s question about defining the category of creative nonfiction is understood by Dale (the only interviewee to do so!), given his academic background. He gives a good historical overview of Wolfe’s and Capote’s influence in the United States on defining genres that they publicized as their own creation. Dale offers the suggestive insight that there is no big distinction between fiction and nonfiction. He defines narrative as “a story. Something being told of worth, that continues on (98),” which could be related to the Aboriginal understanding of what makes a story meaningful. He does, however, delineate some restrictions in journalistic writing, like “when you start ascribing thoughts to your real characters.” Joseph and Dale get into a nitty-gritty discussion about representing a character’s actions imagined by the writer. That is, “I’m showing an action which is quite common and I’m sure she would have done that sort of action,” an assertion that Dale defends (unnecessarily?) with “I checked it with her sister (99).” Joseph cleverly pushes his buttons to fully draw out the ethical implications of narrating details to construct a story, that necessarily requires some imaginative visualizing of a character’s actions. Dale thinks that “a literary writer does something different every time,” in contrast to a genre writer who is confined by genre. Even after a long discussion they do not see eye to eye on creative nonfiction, which Joseph clearly considers a more expansive category than the example of a genre like “crime writing,” and I would agree with her. Joseph’s humor disarms Dale as he remembers exactly when he started to write, and she asks, “You’re kidding—you can remember? . . . Why? Were you in jail or something (107)?”

Simons responds to Joseph’s question of whether her writing can be described as creative nonfiction with “I hate that term (132).” Again, this opens up the conversation instead of shutting it down. Simons explains her irritation with defining a genre through negation, preferring such terms as “dirty journalism,” “disinterested journalism,” and even “objectivity with bullshit (132).” (And I find myself wondering if such course titles might actually increase student enrolments). By now, I start to see that Joseph’s problem is that she envisions an expansive genre that could accommodate many different forms of expression but each interviewee focuses only on their own approach and so, to that extent, the writer is never quite talking about the same outcome or process. I find myself also wondering how the interviewees would see each other included in this book under the unifying banner of creative nonfiction. How would a war correspondent identify with cookbook writers Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrook, however culturally rich the storytelling behind the recipes, and vice versa? How would Garimara respond to Greg Bearup when he says about Aboriginal people that “they’ve been unable to adapt to our system (158)?” And when he rails against the white people he sees as overprotective of Aboriginal stories gathered

and retold by outsiders like himself? Maybe these questions are precisely what make Joseph’s book so engaging, besides opening up the possibility of teaching so many unexamined and un-theorized forms of writing within the academic framework that necessarily categorizes texts and types of discourse.

For a non-Australian like myself, *Behind the Text* also gives me myriad views on Australia, its history, and its varied landscape and people. Bearup’s book *Caravanstan* might at first seem like travel writing, but the trip he makes with his life and writing partner Lisa Upton and their young son is a good example of how stories usually exceed neat categories. While his title references a common mode of vacationing in Australia, driving from beach to beach and sleeping in a camper van, Bearup writes about much more diverse and less comfortable sojourns, joking that his son might end up suing him when he grows up (reminding me of my eldest daughter’s exaggerated complaint that instead of taking the family to nice resorts, we always traveled to slums). Though I haven’t read this book it is now on my list. It promises to be another great introduction to Australia, not based on sameness but rather on diversity, painful histories, and culture clash.

The last three chapters of *Behind the Text* underscore the stark differences Joseph’s genre category tries to accommodate. Joseph opens the conversation with Estelle Blackburn by candidly exposing this writer’s personal experience of abuse at the hands of her ex, drawing the uncanny parallel between her true crime text, *Broken Lives*, about a murder and two innocent men falsely convicted, and her memoir *The End of Innocence*. As I said before, we learn so much about different experiences in Joseph’s conversations, and how all kinds of relationships work. Here, Blackburn ponders the nature of abuse in an intimate relationship—something so easy to blame on the victim for putting up with it, but her intelligent, articulate insights clarify how one instance of forgiveness can seal one’s fate: “When he was gorgeous he was gorgeous (Aussie for ‘generous, loving, kind’)—so they get you into that gambling thing of, well, hang on, that’s a one-off, he’s under a lot of stress . . . that’s the trouble though, as the doctor said, once you’ve given in once, they’ve got you (173).”

It is even possible that Blackburn’s abusive ex may have been the serial “Claremont Killer,” since the deaths of three young girls remain unsolved. This is a difficult conversation for interviewer and interviewee but compellingly illustrates Leser’s claim that women are more interesting than men: “there are places you can go with women. There are places that you can investigate—the corners of the psyche and the soul and the heart—and these are more possible to navigate with women than with men (61).” Is it this kind of place that Joseph and Blackburn investigate together, although it’s a terrifying place for women: “Her enthusiasm and sparkle die down momentarily. The reality of her suspicions—and the deep irony of her professional life intersecting with her private life in such a clear parallel, has clearly taken its toll.” Joseph does not hold back and speculates openly about a plausible connection: “it is almost as if by investigating the horrors Eric Edgar Cooke perpetrated, she channeled his energies and manifested her own version in her own life.” While it is unclear whether Joseph actually voiced this in the interview, Blackburn nevertheless seems to respond directly: “In a way, the blessing of it all was it certainly helped me understand (175).”

Blackburn considers the question of genre in the academic context of accepting a scholarship to write a Ph.D. on how she wrote *Broken Lives*: “So then I understood. There’s literary journalism, they’re trying to legitimize it as a genre; it just came absolutely naturally to me (176).” Joseph pushes Blackburn to examine the contentious issue of the internal narrative she attributes to the murderer Eric Edgar Cooke, which she didn’t put in italics but did base on Cooke’s confessions that she was advised against including as appendices (177). Selecting a quote from their interview, Joseph offers insight into Blackburn’s unfounded lack of self-esteem, perhaps another reason why she gave her abuser another chance, and then another. The implicit connections Joseph draws through shaping the story suggest that maybe it is not just forgiveness, maybe Blackburn doesn’t trust her own instincts of self-preservation and lacks a sense of self-worth: “So I don’t think I’m a good writer. I am just a journo but obviously somewhere along the track I can tune in somewhere and get something down. Really, that’s all I am—I’m a journo that pretends to be a real writer (186).”

The conversation with chef Greg Malouf and Lucy Rushbrooke is probably the most contentious in terms of establishing (or erasing?) the parameters of genre. On the one hand, I agree with Joseph’s impulse to consider hybrid texts: “These books are not just cookbooks; nor are they just travel books. They are a journey of culturally rich information . . . a hybrid of literary journalism, of historical writing, of wonderful recipes and the tastes and the senses and the smells of the food (198).” On the other hand, I wonder about the limitations placed on these authors by marketing criteria and objectives. The interview doesn’t revolve entirely around food but neither does it explore problems of writing in nearly the same detail and depth as the other chapters. Malouf likens his and Rushbrooke’s writing to reportage, “But I guess nonfiction writers, without kind of breaking them down into any sub-category, they write about what they know; it’s an area of expertise, whether it’s academic writing or technical writing or about a particular discipline (212).” Which is true enough, but most technical or academic writing does not aspire to creative nonfiction. And surely the prime objective of contextualizing recipes with however interesting stories precludes writing about many aspects of a given place from the publisher’s perspective, not due to lack of knowledge but to the constraints of the sub-category of food travel. Rushbrooke seems aware of this limitation: “There have probably been things that people have told me that would have added some colour to the story, but because there’s very much a clear agenda to what we’re writing about that kind of stuff doesn’t necessarily have a place in the story. . . (214).” Joseph responds by suggesting that this relates to ethical journalism, which is again a stretch, and overlooks the far more obvious constraints of marketing.

Perhaps because this interview troubles her genre of creative nonfiction, Joseph pursues a subtext about how this couple who have split up, remain friends and colleagues, how they speak openly about the time their relationship hit the rocks during the most stressful phase of producing their first book together: “. . . and we decided to separate. ‘So, Greg, did you move home?’ she asks him . . . ‘I can’t remember where I went . . . I think I lived in the car,’ Malouf says with a small, plaintive smile (197).” We never find out why they split up as a couple. If Joseph knows, she doesn’t let on.

Instead she writes a profile piece focusing on how they negotiate their differences, and their shared passion for travel, food, and imbibing other cultures.

For her last conversation, Joseph visits Anna Goldsworthy, an award-winning author and pianist, in her Adelaide home. They discuss her biography *Piano Lessons* and the famous essay, “Unfinished Business, Sex, Freedom and Misogyny,” about former Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Australian sexism. Joseph admires the beauty of this long-form piece of writing, in which Goldsworthy “seemingly celebrates Gillard’s Misogyny Speech as a breakaway from the safe and anodyne endurance of endemic sexism, rampant throughout Australia (225).” Upon discussing *Welcome to Your New Life*, about Goldsworthy’s pregnancy and birth of her son, Joseph discovers that Goldsworthy crafted composite characters and then explores the ethical question of not revealing this with a disclaimer. Joseph expresses concern but in a non-judgmental way, suggesting that “flagging this technique with her readers before they read, would position her more strongly. Perhaps next time (231).” This resonates with some of the previous interviews, in that writers of creative nonfiction (or whatever label they prefer or reject all together) are not always fully conscious of all writing decisions they make but learn through dialogue with readers, critics, and theorists, who put them into conversations with other writers as Joseph does in this book. And together we ponder different storytelling techniques and their ethical implications.

Since *Behind the Text* ends without an epilogue or conclusion, the words that stick in Joseph’s mind spoken to her by Goldsworthy end up perhaps carrying more weight than intended. Or maybe sequencing the interviews with Goldsworthy as the concluding chapter does intentionally draw the reader’s attention to the words appearing in italics: “It’s the difference between seeing and looking, I guess; the difference between hearing and listening (244).” Goldsworthy’s words are drawn from a long quote on the same page about how an artist interprets experience, “making it real, not just giving information but actually embodying it.” This observation is probably more clearly about the genre Joseph wants to categorize as creative nonfiction.

I’m of two minds about the lack of a “post mortem.” While the ideas and performative strategies in these ten conversations accrue in support of Joseph’s umbrella category of creative nonfiction, I’m not sure why she avoids theorizing them. Isn’t that how we extrapolate concepts from one context to another relevant one? But maybe it is just this avoidance of nailing down the genre that Joseph considers generative of hybrid forms of writing. *Behind the Text* has helped me to understand the restrictions of literary journalism, because of journalism’s conventions and journalists’ formation. Like many others in the field of nonfiction, I’m tired of the debate “between those who believe storytelling distorts the truth, and those who see narrative as a particularly effective way of conveying truth (xiv),” even if we must weigh these factors on a case-by-case basis. Ironically (given that Joseph sees herself as a member of the tribe of IALJS, and book review editor of this publication requested a review of her book), *Behind the Text* proposes to those of us who are not journalists and write about texts that exceed the restrictions of even “literary” journalism to consider other venues identified with creative nonfiction. In any event, Joseph’s book of conversations is sure to generate many more fertile conversations within the tribe and beyond.

Redeeming Narrative, or Narrative as Redeemer?

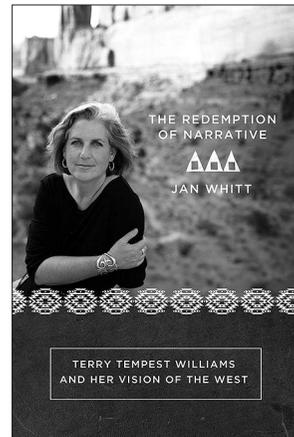
The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West
by Jan Whitt. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2016. Hardcover, 254 pp., \$29

Reviewed by Doug Cumming, Washington & Lee University, United States

A colleague in another department, the English Department, told me I should read a book by Terry Tempest Williams called *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. I found it in the Science Library. It was a work of radiant insight, autobiographical and political and poetic all at once. The book, published in 1991, begins with a poem by Mary Oliver and a naturalist's map of Great Salt Lake in Utah. Thirty-six chapters each bear the name of a bird, most of them observed by the author in the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, and each begins with the exact, weirdly fluctuating level of the adjacent Great Salt Lake at the time of her observation (to a hundredth of an inch). This is scrupulous science writing, but each chapter is also a mini-essay made of journal entries in the old Emersonian tradition. The book's elegant structure is alloyed with woman-wildness.

The final, thirty-seventh chapter, "The Clan of the One-Breasted Women," describes the testing of atomic bombs that occurred in Nevada, upwind of Mormon settlements in Utah, between 1951 and 1962. Williams, after her mother's death from cancer, told her father about a recurring dream from childhood, a flash of light over the mesas of a desert. "You did see it," he told her. "The bomb. The cloud." The Tempest family had been driving home from California an hour before dawn in 1957 when they saw and felt one of the bomb tests, which rained light ash on the car. The writer, one of ten women in her family who had mastectomies, cannot say whether the bomb tests are to blame for creating this clan of one-breasted women. But her questioning of Cold War patriotism, along with her questioning of the authority of her Mormon Church leaders, inducts her into another clan of ten women—protesters who trespassed onto the Nevada Test Site to be arrested. A female officer who frisked her finds a pen and paper tucked in one of Williams's boots. "And these?" she asks. "Weapons," the writer says with a smile.

The copy of *Refuge* that I borrowed from the Science Library a couple of years ago lists seven other books she had also written by the time of this edition in 2000. Why had I never heard of her, this Annie Dillard of the West, or any of these books? I have found the answer to that question in this critical study of Terry Tempest Williams by Jan Whitt, a professor of journalism, literature, and media studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Whitt, who has published critical studies around



what she calls the "borderland" between fiction and nonfiction, makes it clear that Williams inhabits a borderland all her own.

Being inspired by Whitt's book, I went looking for writings by Williams in the university's main library. There were forty-four separate titles containing her work. These were scattered all over the place, mostly as essays in edited collections around various categories, such as women writers on the environment, eccentric ideas for wilderness preservation, a sense of place, and writers of the West. The problem, for literary critics anyway, is that she eludes genres, and does so deliberately. "When we separate, segregate, and sequester ourselves into boxes, compartments, and genres, we are allowed to fall asleep," she tells Whitt in an email interview near the end of *The Redemption of Narrative*. "We are all diminished by categories. We flourish in an open landscape of the imagination."

Williams also pushed against the conventional category of professor at the University of Utah, where she has taught in the Environmental Humanities graduate program that she founded. The university apparently didn't appreciate her teaching students in the desert rather than on campus, so last year she ended some slogging negotiations over her contract and quit.

Whitt addresses the problem of categorization by placing eight of Williams's books into four thematic chapters: narrative, allegory, activism as phenomenology, and apocalyptic revelation. The themes are woven around Eliot's "Four Quartets," the familiar first lines of each of these poems quoted as a chapter head. One of the pleasures of this critical study is passing through the warm sunlight of long passages from Eliot as well as from Williams. The second half of the book places Williams in the company of literary journalists and animal-rights activists, or rather three allegorical texts by Hemingway, Orwell, and Roger Rosenblatt about the killing of an animal.

Provoking us to read and appreciate Williams, Whitt's book provides a valuable service. It reminds us that literary journalism, or whatever label we want to give well-crafted nonfiction, can be about more than characters caught in the public affairs of the day or some human complication—although Williams's grief over the treatment of earth, animals, and habitable communities is as current and compelling as any journalism. Williams goes much deeper, into the metaphorical signs of the world, whether in the Great Basin of her home state, or a seven-year study of Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado of Madrid, or the unfamiliar wonders of the Serengeti.

For an academic book to parse the meaning of all this rich work of "meaning-making" is hugely challenging, especially when it draws on a great many literary comparisons and five previous works by Whitt. The book feels oddly repetitive and free of criticism, with many disconcerting references to its own own chapters and to its title, becoming literally a self-referential text.

The book is more an appreciation than an analysis. The title leaves us with an interesting ambiguity. Is Williams redeeming the art of narrative with her Transcendentalist storytelling, or is she using narrative to redeem something in the world—or in herself, or in the reader? *The Redemption of Narrative* invites the reader to try on all these meanings.

The Journalism and the Murderer

The Media and the Massacre: Port Arthur 1996–2016

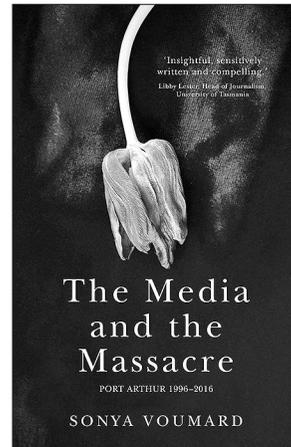
by Sonya Voumard. Melbourne: Transit Lounge Publishing, 2016. Paperback, 224 pp., AUD\$29 (US\$22)

Reviewed by Rosemary Armao, State University of New York at Albany, United States

Journalist Sonya Voumard did not write *The Media and the Massacre* for an American audience, but her book ought to stir the same guilt and raise the same uncomfortable questions for her colleagues in that country as they have in Australia. The massacre of the title refers to a 1996 mass shooting in Tasmania at a one-time Port Arthur prison colony turned tourist attraction that left thirty-five people dead and twenty-three injured. It was the worst shooting ever in Australia, and led to massive gun law reforms, as well as to the 1,035-year prison sentence shooter Martin Bryant continues to serve. Mass killings and the coverage of them, meanwhile, have continued unabated in this country with death tolls near or surpassing Port Arthur's (thirty-two in Blacksburg, Virginia in 2007; twenty-seven in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012; forty-nine in Orlando this year). Voumard's insights may, in fact, be even more needed in America than at home.

What exactly should journalists be allowed to go after in pursuing stories about violence and mass death? Where does public interest leave off and torment for a city or a region begin? Where does privacy begin and end for the survivors, for relatives of victims, and especially for relatives of the shooters? What care should we take in talking to victims and survivors of trauma? When people have complaints about how we do with the story we tell, what happens then? Who listens to them and mediates? In short, what is the relationship between reporter and source, and which one owns the story being told? Voumard's view about the essential deception at the heart of most journalism is reminiscent of Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*. "We will tell your story," we attempt to bribe the people we want to turn into sources. "We understand you and will make others see you in the way you want to be seen."

Critics have consistently noted one flaw in *The Media and the Massacre* and that is Voumard's focus for too much of the book on the how married journalists Robert Wainwright and Paolo Totaro appear to have cheated Bryant's mother, Carleen Bryant in writing their 2009 book *Born or Bred*. The writers made a deal to tell the mother's story. They wanted to get at the good question of what led the shooter to act, but they ended the partnership after the mother steadfastly held that her son was innocent. They wrote their own book but used long excerpts of a manuscript the mother wrote and shared with them when she thought they'd be partners. In effect,



they used her own words to damn her as the creator of a killer. Carleen Bryant won a legal settlement it sounds like she richly deserved. They so plainly did wrong that Voumard might have dispatched it quickly as an extreme case and gotten back to less well-defined wrongs journalists too often commit in telling great stories.

Journalists covering riveting sociopathic events would do well to think about their motivation. Are they out to titillate, to out-scoop competitors on details no one else has, to gain access to the suffering and wrongdoings no one else has? Why? Do they purely want to make a name for themselves? Because this is a work of literary nonfiction, Voumard turns us into reporters along with her. This is a smart method for getting into the profound ethical issues she is tackling here. She began with her dissertation but transformed a dry academic tome into an easy-to-read nonfiction narrative that puts us into the shoes of journalist. We listen to her interview colleagues and scholars while interrogating her own motives as a journalist and a news consumer. She allows us to accompany her as she digs into public records when rebuffed by people who don't want to be interviewed. The Port Arthur killings occurred as Voumard started her first job as a cub reporter, explaining how it came to inspire this in-depth ethical reexamination.

In recent times, as the guns have continued to blaze, journalists have attempted to do better. Anderson Cooper and the *New York Times* have made headlines by telling the stories of victims in as rich detail as the biographies of perpetrators. The Dart Center at Columbia University has led the way in sensitively interviewing victims of crime, war, and dislocation so that information does not come at the cost of further trauma. Reporters ask themselves whether they are perpetuating violence by glorifying and reveling in stories about massacre.

It's hard to say if that is sufficient. The relevance to my work of what I was reading came to me before I finished the book. I received a message via Facebook from a woman asking if I were the same journalist who had written about her mother thirty-five years ago in Youngstown, Ohio. Rosalie Grant had been convicted of burning up her two toddler sons in order to collect insurance she'd taken out on them. The woman calling me, a third child, had lived with her grandmother and had come to believe that while her mother held some responsibility for her brothers' deaths, the real culprit was a drug dealer out to get some cash.

I had two immediate reactions. One was guilt that while it was certainly my byline I had no independent memory of writing about Rosalie Grant or hearing her defiant denial of guilt in the courthouse. To my messenger, like the residents of Tasmania, it was a traumatic event that changed her life; to me it was just old news. I didn't care like she did. My second reaction was glee at what a cool story it would be to go back and revisit anew a sensational case from the viewpoint of a sorrowful daughter who had children of her own now. Awful news that changes people is opportunity for journalists.

Voumard's book had at least enough effect on me that I insisted the daughter tell me what she hoped to accomplish by turning over information to me, especially as I warned her that I didn't think her mother was innocent. "I just want the whole story," she said, "wherever the facts leads." There you have it—sources trust you to tell their story even when you warn them it might not turn out as they think. Just be objective, they instruct. And that is easier said than done.

Long-form, Investigative, Prize-winning Women

Newswomen: Twenty-Five Years of Front-Page Journalism

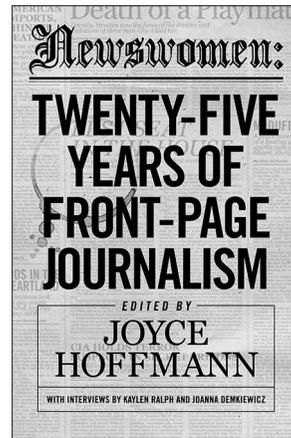
edited by Joyce Hoffmann. La Jolla, California: Sager Group, 2015. Paperback, 304 pp., \$24.

Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, State University of New York at Albany, United States

Where are the women? Students of literary journalism often used to ask this question after encountering anthologies of mostly male writers. Recent scholarship has helped shine a light on women literary journalists previously overlooked, such as this journal's special issue devoted to the subject in Spring 2015 ("Women and Literary Journalism," vol. 7, No. 1). Now, thanks to the staff of the *Riveter*, a magazine and website showcasing long-form nonfiction written by women, and The Sager Group, there's an entire splendid anthology of long-form journalism written by seventeen women investigative and literary reporters at major newspapers and alternative weeklies. *Newswomen: Twenty-Five Years of Front-Page Journalism* includes selections by Edna Buchanan, the legendary *Miami Herald* crime reporter, and other Pulitzer Prize winners such as Jacqui Banaszynski, Teresa Carpenter, Amy Harmon, Loretta Tofani, and Deborah Blum.

Each chapter includes a selected piece, bookended by a short biography and an author's afterword that is original to this book. This works well to provide a contextual depth for stories that command immediate interest. After reading Carpenter's compelling account of the 1982 murder of *Playboy* centerfold Dorothy Stratten, we want to know how and why the author undertook such immersion research. She was curious about "what *really* happened," she explains; indeed, that is the mantra that guides all of her reporting. This curiosity inspired the exhaustive research that led to her conclusion that Stratten's murderer, her estranged pimp husband, could not forgive himself for "his unforgivable sin" of "being small-time."

A similar intense curiosity to understand why and how seems to motivate most if not all of the other journalists featured in *Newswomen*. As Banaszynski reflects in her afterword, "I was an overly curious little girl growing up in the 1950s and '60s in rural, old-world America. Who knows if you're born with curiosity or you're introduced to it, but I remember my mother always telling me I asked too many questions, and I remember my father paying me a quarter if I would stop talking for fifteen minutes at a time." Banaszynski went on to earn a Pulitzer for her path-breaking series about a gay Minnesota farm couple dying of AIDS in 1988. She begins: "Death is no stranger to the heartland. It is as natural as the seasons, as inevitable as farm machinery break-



ing down and farmers' bodies giving out after too many years of too much work.

"But when death comes in the guise of AIDS, it is a disturbingly unfamiliar visitor, one better known in the gay districts and drug houses of the big cities, one that shows no respect for the usual order of life in the country." Through extensive research that includes intimate interviews with the couple and others, Banaszynski revealed a much more nuanced picture of the disease's consequences than the widespread public panic of that time twenty-five years ago had allowed.

Tofani, a staff writer for the *Washington Post* and then the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, exemplifies the important role of the literary journalist as a social conscience. Her selection, "American Imports, Chinese Deaths," details the gruesome occupational illnesses suffered by Chinese factory workers who help make cheap products for export. "With each new report of lead detected on a made-in-China toy, Americans express outrage: These toys could poison children. But Chinese workers making the toys—and countless products for America—touch and inhale carcinogenic materials very day, all day long. Benzene. Lead. Cadmium. Toluene. Nickel. Mercury." Tofani's research showed that "the toxins and hazards exist in virtually every industry including furniture, shoes, car parts, electronic items, jewelry, clothes, toys, and batteries." Her straightforward, declarative sentences build a picture of catastrophe and death lurking in plain sight, if we would only look.

Like many of the anthology's other writers, Tofani notes her early attraction to journalism as "a means of exploration and adventure, a way to be able to see things for myself." Her professors at Fordham helped her "to understand the responsibility of journalism as a sort of moral mission" and this, she says, "sparked my fire for investigative reporting."

Harmon, a *New York Times* reporter, is represented by her piece about a young woman who undergoes genetic testing that confirms she will eventually fall victim to Huntington's disease. Another fine example of literary science journalism is Blum's "Monkey Wars," which takes the reader into the center of an ethical debate about the use of monkeys in research to benefit humans.

Other writers included in *Newswomen* are: Christine Brennan, Athelia Knight, Corinne Reilly, Lane DeGregory, Diana Henriques, Julia Keller, Dana Priest, Anne Hull, Christine Pelisek, Eileen Welsome, and Andrea Elliott. The latter journalist's "A Muslim Leader in Brooklyn," first published in the *New York Times* in 2006, remains a fresh evocation of the challenges an American imam faces in the post-9/11 world.

Editor Joyce Hoffmann, a journalism professor at Old Dominion University and the author of *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam*, should be commended for her efforts as should the Sager Group, which plans two additional, affordable anthologies of literary long-form writing by women. *Newswomen* is an excellent start to catch us up on where the women are and what they've been doing all these years, namely, writing award-winning literary journalism that can inspire our students.

Recovering Great War Reportages

Literary Journalism and World War I: Marginal Voices

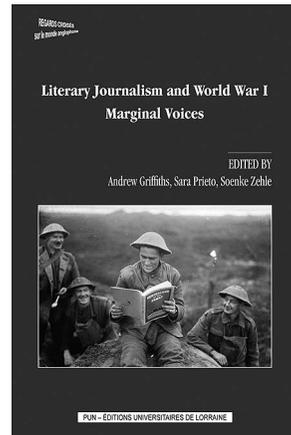
edited by Andrew Griffiths, Sara Prieto, and Soenke Zehle. Nancy, France: Presses Universitaires de Nancy—Éditions Universitaires de Lorraine, 2016. Paperback, 270 pp., €14 (US\$17)

Reviewed by Brian Gabriel, Concordia University, Canada

Most good research is either an act of discovery or of recovery. The edited collection *Literary Journalism and World War I: Marginal Voices* falls into the latter category. It seems that a conflict that left millions dead and wounded would inspire countless true, journalistic stories with strong literary values, but that was not so. In the book's eight main sections, its contributors revisit works of literary journalism, both written and visual, that survived not only the war but also the heavy government censorship placed upon them and their creators. Such restrictions generated reporting that often left readers "only partially aware of the true human cost of the war." However, by shining an intense light on this journalism again, the editors assert a purpose that will "dispel the lingering sense that the war reportage of the conflict can be dismissed as nothing more than state-sponsored propaganda." The editors succeed—mostly.

Naturally, the centenary of any major, cataclysmic event is sure to produce renewed interest in it. As the one hundredth anniversary of the November 11, 1918, armistice nears, this book reacquaints us with the important work of World War I literary journalists, many of whom emerged from the late nineteenth-century "new journalism" tradition. They could be what John Bak observes in his examination of trench war journals: "proto" literary journalists, because the writings "just don't tell, they show." These World War I journalists, in some respects, trod a path later walked on by mid- to late-twentieth-century New Journalists because they also pushed back against the constraints of their time, place, and professional practice.

Each of the book's eight sections follows a structure that contains three elements. First, the reader is introduced to selected samples of literary journalistic production, followed by a "contextual gloss" that situates the work within frames of circumstances at the point of origination. (As a critique, it would have been more useful to have the "contextual gloss" precede these samples because, without it I found myself challenging editorial choices about including some of these selections.) Following the gloss is an in-depth, scholarly analysis. These analyses present arguments justifying the work's literary merit while providing more information about the writer or artist.



Taken together, this trio—sample, gloss, and scholarship—"highlight[s] the range of effects produced by the combination of literary techniques with factual reportage" that, according to the editors, can on the surface seem propagandistic but really might be subversive.

What make this collection especially valuable to the literary journalism scholar are various explorations into geographical expansions of the genre that highlight discrete national (journalistic and literary) traditions while challenging the reader to think differently about what constitutes literary journalism. This geographic range includes writers from Argentina, Catalonia, Sweden, and the United States, among others. Their experiences and backgrounds also varied. For example, one writer, John Buchan, was an English aristocrat who eventually became the Governor-General of Canada; another, Velona Pilcher, the only woman whose work is included here, became a noted playwright.

Overall, the majority of the book's scholarly analyses present a similar thesis about literary journalism, which is twofold: 1) inclusion and 2) expansion. The argument for inclusion is simple in that the scholar hopes that the reader will be convinced of the literary merits of the journalism. So, when Andrew Griffiths writes, "Buchan's observations do not simply describe the objects and scenes he encountered but invite us to share his responses to them," it is not much different from what Jane Ekstam argues about Gustaf Hellström: "Hellström's war articles invited the reader to participate in rather than merely observe events." When Charlotte Purkis, who examined Velona Pilcher's war journalism, observes that the war was a "catalyst for the liberation of Pilcher's writing from documentary critical reporting to imaginative writing capable of allying experience, aesthetics and belief," her comment could be said about all of the writers in this volume.

I noted at the outset that the book "mostly" achieves its ends. While the scholarship is useful, some is presented in such dry fashion that it nearly diminishes the value of the subject matter. In some cases, arguments barely hit their mark. Still, the majority of the research substantively and adequately accentuates the literary qualities of the journalism. Thus, the secondary material, while sometimes repetitive, provides a good review of current literary journalism theory.

Finally, in his look at the Catalan journalists covering World War I, Xavier Pla uses Austrian writer Stefan Zweig's phrase "world of yesterday" to denote how, by the war's end, a way of life, especially in Europe, had forever disappeared. Zweig's "world of yesterday" reminded me of another observation, this one by Willa Cather, who wrote that the "world broke in two" after World War I. Cather suggested that the war's violence left individuals and society unable to reconcile a past left in ruins to the present. In the 100-plus years since the Great War began, that reconciliation is ongoing because so many post-war decisions set up the world for future calamity. Thus, the resurrected literary journalism highlighted in *Literary Journalism and World War I: Marginal Voices* reminds us how war affects those on and near the front lines and how repressing talk about those effects can only lead to an uncertain future.

Immersion Tips from a Master

Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep

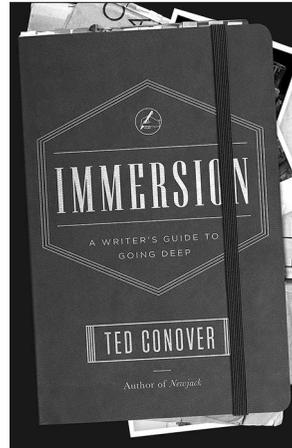
by Ted Conover. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Paperback, 192 pp., \$18

Reviewed by Patrick Walters, Kutztown University, United States

As Ted Conover has developed a reputation for his immersion journalism over the past four decades, he has often been asked for advice on his reporting and storytelling techniques. People want to know just how he went about delving into the worlds of railway hoboes (*Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*), illegal immigrants (*Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants*), and corrections officers (*Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*). In recent years, Conover, who teaches at New York University, came to the realization he should put some of his advice down on paper. That effort became *Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep*, which he calls “the book I wish I had in hand when I set off to ride the rails” for *Rolling Nowhere*, which began as his undergraduate anthropology thesis at Amherst College. He writes this new book, he says in his introduction, for “younger versions of me” and “for anyone who might want to give such a project a try.”

In this project, Conover uses the approach of a veteran writer giving advice to aspiring immersion journalists. But it is sprinkled with something more, his reflective analysis helping to take it beyond being so simply defined. He weaves in thoughtful contemplation of which types of work constitute immersion journalism, and which types don't. He begins by exploring the different immersive approaches of classic practitioners such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and George Plimpton. He also examines more modern ones, including Barbara Ehrenreich, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, and Bill Buford. In Chapter 2, he takes a strong stand on pursuits he doesn't consider immersion journalism, such as virtual reality, memoir, and projects where “a writer concocts a conceit,” the last a category in which he refers to books such as A. J. Jacobs's *The Year of Living Biblically*. In this way, Conover sets up parameters for immersion that are purely journalistic, and carry the weight of his own body of work, giving the book much more authority than Robin Hemley's *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing: Memoir, Journalism and Travel* (2012), for example, which was far more permissive in labeling different types of work as immersion.

Conover uses the voice of a friendly and knowledgeable narrator to guide a prospective immersion journalist through such a project, starting with purely practical



advice about “Choosing a Subject and Gaining Access” (Chapter 2), and how writers should conduct themselves “Once Inside” (Chapter 3). From a writer's standpoint, this book provides valuable advice for both budding and experienced writers. It is an everyman's approach in which Conover acknowledges the cultural value of immersion journalism as something “that has huge potential for sowing empathy in the world” (Introduction). His writing here builds on his interview for Robert S. Boynton's *The New New Journalism* (2005), particularly on the subject of not “going native.” He explores the establishment of a writer's voice and the boundaries of the reportorial persona, addressing the tension between reportorial distance and the required intimate knowledge of the subject. “Have I left my skin for someone else's? That's not how I look at it,” he writes. Later, he emphasizes the fairly elementary advice that “The writer's first duty is to the integrity of the writing, not to the relationship with the source (Chapter 3).” Conover is using his professorial voice here, first and foremost, and this book is meant even for a novice writer.

While this is primarily a “how-to” book, it is also one written by a practitioner who shows a scholar's eye, one that provides insight as to how we define the form and what rules it should follow. As Conover explores the risk-reward calculus of “undercover” reporting, he of course addresses his own time spent as a corrections officer in *Newjack*, including a caution that undercover can be seen as the “easy way out (Chapter 4).” And when he gets down to addressing the techniques of actually *writing* immersion journalism, he reflects on his use of the first person and why he's found it to work best: “Often, if not usually, questions can accompany an author's choice of subject and his relationship to it. If he is a character in the story, these questions become even more significant . . . (Chapter 5).” He speaks here not only as an educator instructing on how-to, but also as a scholar who is stepping back to take a look at his own work.

The main question is one of audience. *Immersion* is primarily a text for aspiring journalists of all ages, one that could be used in a graduate or upper-level undergraduate journalism or literary journalism course. Its advice is straightforward and assumes nothing. The book is meant to be accessible to all. But, interspersed among these details are key bits of analysis that also serve to assess and analyze the form, setting parameters, exploring ethical dilemmas and examining the use of the first-person in immersion, and how it differs from other forms such as memoir. In this way, it also provides a fresh perspective on the question of what immersion means today.