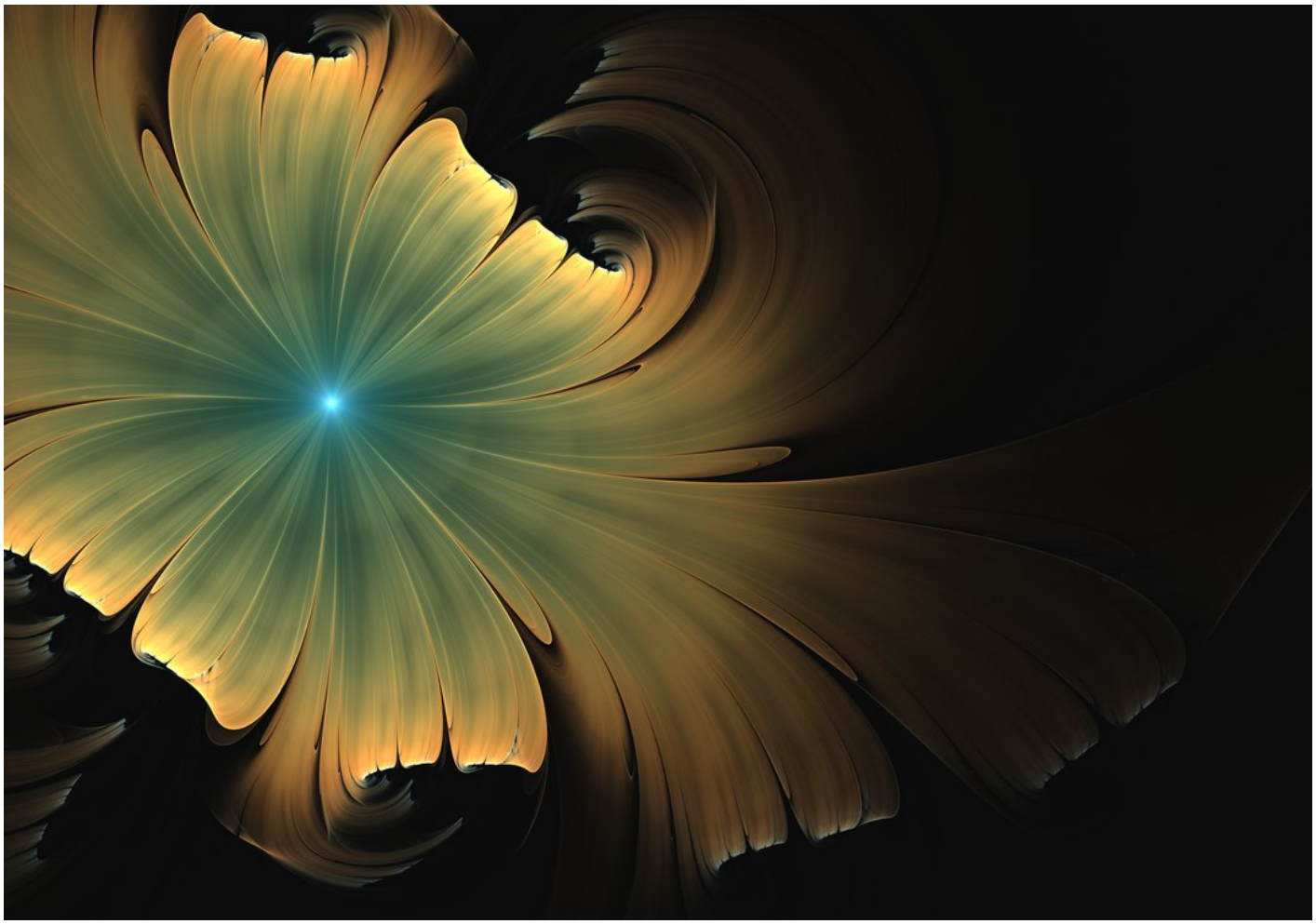
How I Became a First-Person Journalist [1]

March 21, 2016 Media Debate [2]
First Person [3]
Journalism [4]

TW Column by Martha Nichols

Why Gonzo Got It Wrong—and Right



When Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* came out in 1973, I was fifteen. At the time, I wasn't reading his arguments about why the "pale beige tone" of news writing needed a kick in the ass. But I was greatly influenced by Hunter S. Thompson's fast-and-loose, imagination-fueled reports from the field, especially when they lined up with my countercultural desire to tear down the walls. I was a bookworm kid in California who loved glitter rock, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. I grew up thinking the truth was what you shaped for yourself.

In *The New Journalism*, Wolfe touted nonfiction with a literary twist, complete with vivid characters and scenes that

incorporated dialogue, even internal monologue that represented what a subject might have been thinking or feeling. “[H]ow could a journalist, writing nonfiction, accurately penetrate the thoughts of another person?” he asked, before exuberantly providing his own answer: “interview him about his thoughts and emotions, along with everything else.”

Back then, this cavalier approach to journalism suited me fine. My other bookish loves were novels—big fat facsimiles of the real world. I enjoyed immersing myself in seamless plots, suspending disbelief. In high school, my goal was to be a novelist, and a science fiction novelist at that. I would be a master of imagined worlds—detailing everything from an alien planet’s biology to its history of colonization—and stay far away from chronicling the emotional thicket of my actual experience.

In hindsight, my young writing goals were way off base. I was meant to be a journalist, but I backed into it, even getting a master’s degree in creative writing. My jump into magazine journalism in the early ‘90s was pure chance—a job that opened up when I needed one—but it also turned out to be the right match for the way I think about the world.

In the ‘60s and ‘70s, the New Journalists were part of a revolution against the Powers That Be. Like these revolutionaries, I wanted to change the terms of truth telling and who got to control history. Despite their macho posturing, I was on board—a young feminist writer who followed their trail almost without question, as did many of the journalists and editors of my era.

Then the World Wide Web happened, profoundly changing how writing reaches readers—and unleashing a creative torrent of “truth telling” from all sides.

Oh, the irony. (*The irony!!!!!*—as Wolfe would crow.) Now, after decades as a magazine editor and writer, I’m confronting the inadequacy of the novel-like journalism I used to love. I’m wrestling with its messy legacy in creative nonfiction classrooms. And I’m concerned about what’s been lost with the implosion of traditional journalism, including basics like verification of facts and attribution of sources.

Don’t get me wrong. I still believe in personally inflected journalism that's liberated, as the New Journalism was, from false claims of objectivity. Like so many readers in the digital age, I’m more convinced than ever by personal stories. But I no longer like being faked out. Hunter Thompson was a brilliant reporter, questioner, brooder—all qualities I admire in first-person writing—but his “I” was mostly a fictional creation.

The first-person journalism I now embrace involves more than the first-person voice. I don’t mean personal stories recalled (or artfully reconstructed) by a memoirist. I do mean stories and essays that extend beyond individual experience, where the journalism part should never be fudged. Beautiful language, wit, the quest for deeper truths—none of these qualities justifies changing what actually happened unless you, the writer, come clean with readers and maybe even with yourself.

Take the unraveling of “A Rape on Campus,” an article published in November 2014 by *Rolling Stone*, that hotbed of New Journalism. Sabrina Rubin Erdely opened her 9,000-word feature with a shocking narrative reconstruction of an alleged gang rape at a University of Virginia frat party. It was told from the point of view of the supposed victim, Jackie. Just days after publication, critics began poking holes in the factual basis of Jackie's story, and in April 2015, *Rolling Stone* retracted the piece.

But what if Erdely had opened the feature with her own first-person voice?

When Jackie first told me, I was horrified. Her story shifted over time as she told it, but I wanted to believe her, because I thought something bad had happened to this young woman. Exactly what and how is the tricky part—but that's the trouble with abuse that occurs in the shadows. It ends up being "he said, she said," with those who have more power controlling the story. It's always about whose story you'd rather believe.

This version exists only in my imagination, of course. It’s the story I wish Erdely had written, one honest enough about the limits of her knowledge (as I conceive it) that it might have prevented both her and Jackie from being trashed in the press. As it was, I hated the gloating generalizations from legions of online detractors, as if one sloppy case proves all women who tell rape stories are liars.

Erdely's feature may have been doomed from the start. But she did inject her first-person voice into later sections. She visited the campus, made her own observations, talked to other people. I found most of it convincing as a piece of advocacy journalism. The problem was the narrative reconstruction of Jackie's experience in the beginning. As the Columbia School of Journalism report about "What Went Wrong" underscores, Erdely put too much stock in a story told by a single unreliable source because it confirmed her own biases.

In portraying what another person insisted was true (to paraphrase Wolfe's '70s-era formulations), Erdely and *Rolling Stone* ended up with a scene that could have been ripped from a crime novel. The over-the-top aspects of this narrative, including dialogue that the people in question now say never happened, waved a big red flag. Novelistic scenes encourage readers to suspend disbelief—to be emotionally gripped by the story. But these techniques also influence what a journalist focuses on while tracking down that story, an even bigger threat to getting at the truth.

In contrast, the "I" voice can expose what a writer believes, and why, in a very different way. "I know this because" is a powerful statement. When nonfiction writers frame their own observations in the first person, they're much more likely to challenge themselves about what they know and don't know. Even if the final feature ends up in the third-person voice, acknowledging personal biases while doing the reporting can push journalists to verify what they otherwise might not have.

I'm not calling for a wholesale abandonment of good storytelling in narrative journalism. Not every nonfiction piece benefits from a personal perspective, either. News reports are news reports. But feature writing is about interpreting complex topics for readers. The *Rolling Stone* debacle tested my faith in the use of fiction-writing techniques for nonfiction that rests on conflicting sources. It also clarified for me why a first-person story that makes a writer's gaps in knowledge explicit can end up being a more truthful account.

Since 2010, when I co-founded *Talking Writing*, I've observed how much the popularity of creative nonfiction, even in slick magazines, has affected the journalistic approach to feature writing. Literary essays, memoir, blogging, and reporting continue to overlap and meld, a first-person trend I mostly applaud. Yet, it's also led to some troubling confusion about how to handle facts.

In literary circles, first-person nonfiction features are often called everything *but* journalism (I've heard at least one writing instructor talk about a "Modern Love column personal kind of thing"). This vagueness about a literary author's intent can mislead creative nonfiction students—whether they see themselves as gonzo journalists, lyrical essayists, or memoirists opposed to doing any research—into thinking that revising reality is acceptable in order to craft a good narrative. For this reason alone, journalists have a lot to teach other nonfiction writers.

But journalists also gain by becoming more self-expressive. A first-person approach can be a powerful tool for providing the reporting context—*how did I get this information? why do I trust this source? why does this story matter?*—that at least some readers expect of complicated features.

For me, the valuable legacy of the New Journalism is not its overreach into fiction but its move toward complex self-examination and expression. It's not Hunter Thompson's exaggerated gonzo persona, "Raoul Duke," screaming across the desert in a narcotics-packed convertible hallucinating about giant bats. Rather, it's the Hunter Thompson who declared, in the opening note for his book about the 1972 presidential campaign, that his goal was to write "as close to the bone as I could get."

In "Fear and Loathing in the Bunker," a 1974 commentary published in the *New York Times* after months of Watergate coverage, Thompson moves between childhood memory and his adult reflections. Recoiling from "the horror of American politics today" and the "burned-out hack" politicians running the show, he asks, "How long, oh Lord, how long?" Then he pushes it farther:

> And how much longer will we have to wait before some high-powered shark with a fistful of answers will finally bring us face-to-face with the ugly question that is already so close to the surface in this country, that sooner or later even politicians will have to cope with it?

> Is the democracy worth all the risks and problems that necessarily go with it?

Forty-plus years later, these questions make me shiver with their prescience, their bitterness. They are definitely close to the bone. More important, though, Thompson then connects his fist shake at God with his own unknowing culpability at ten years old, when he says he worked for a milkman in Louisville, Kentucky:

> But every once in a while, on humorless nights like these, I think about how sharp and sure I felt when sprinting across those manicured lawns, jumping the finely-trimmed hedges and hitting the running board of that slow-cruising truck.
>
> If the milkman had given me a pistol and told me to put a bullet in the stomach of any slob who haggled about the bill, I would probably have done that, too. Because the milkman was my boss and my benefactor…. On a 'need to know' basis, the milkman understood that I was not among the needy. Nor was he, for that matter. We were both a lot happier just doing what we were told.

Here, I feel the ghost of real pain. It's the same true voice I hear lifting off the page when students in my journalism classes respond to the world around them in unique, personal ways. A nonfiction writer's voice is always constructed, but sometimes its authenticity only rings out in response to events beyond the self.

I can't think of a better antidote to the digital media sphere we now confront. We're steeped in corporate interests that project themselves as the hip good guys, in virtual spaces where writers like Thompson have long since been co-opted and personal authenticity is easily faked. I'm a first-person journalist because I know I should question my own assumptions as well as the facts. I don't always like it. It can be extremely unfun when the facts prove me wrong. But if I admit I'm wrong and wonder why, that's when I move past the chimeras that mask so many truths.

It's just my humble opinion, but when a nonfiction writer expresses doubts, readers get permission to ask their own questions. The new nonfiction isn't only informative and entertaining—the traditional hallmarks of journalism—or close to the bone. It's illuminating. It exposes our weaknesses in getting at the truth. For me, this shared vulnerability is what makes us human. Even in the midst of so much private information slopping over into public spaces, honest self-examination is far too rare, the most radical of fist shakes. It's where the real truth telling starts.

Guidelines for First-Person Journalism

- Make sure the story is about more than you.
- Determine which parts of the story relate to you—and which don't.
- Use meaningful personal anecdotes, stories that illuminate the larger subject.
- Direct the story; don't let other people tell it.
- Ask questions and anticipate the reader's questions; don't play expert.
- Verify everything; don't trust your memory or a single source's opinion of an event.
- Attribute information, where appropriate, to sources.
- Include counterpoints to your argument.
- Limit self-reflexive storytelling and snarkiness but…

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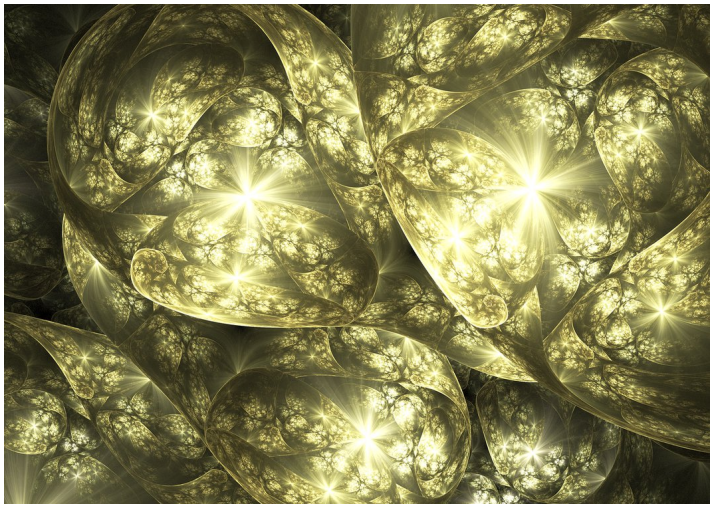

Publishing Information

- *The New Journalism* by Tom Wolfe (Harper & Row, 1973).
- "Rolling Stone and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report—What Went Wrong?" [5] by Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz, *Rolling Stone*, April 5, 2015.
- "Rolling Stone and the Backlash Against Advocacy Journalism" [6] by Martha Nichols, *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*, June 4, 2015.
- *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* by Hunter S. Thompson (Straight Arrow Books, 1973).
- "Fear and Loathing in the Bunker" by Hunter S. Thompson, *New York Times*, January 1, 1974.

Art Information

- "Sparkle of Hope" [7] and "Let Me Shine Please" [8] © Niels Langeveld; used by permission.

Go deep. Make clear why you believe what you do.

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Portions of this column have been excerpted from "What Is First-Person Journalism?," a longer essay that Martha wrote as part of the curriculum for her First-Person Journalism and Magazine Writing classes.

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