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The Structure and Style of Narrative Journalism

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Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction. Jack Hart. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$25. hardback.

In his book *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*, Jack Hart writes like an editor, which is meant as a compliment.

The problem with most guidebooks to writing narrative journalism is that they are written by writers. James B. Stewart is a terrific prose stylist and can cobble together a narrative structure, but when he tries to explain the process in his book *Follow the Story* (Simon & Schuster, 1998), he can get lost in his own stories and his own very specific writing method and style. And, of course, the examples are from stories he wrote. William Blundell's *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* (Plume, 1988) does a somewhat better job of avoiding this trap, in part because Blundell has worked as a writing coach and can see how to help other people shape their writing. But Blundell, a former *Wall Street Journal* writer, focuses on newspaper features, and his book is now more than 20 years old. Good writing is good writing, but examples do get dusty, especially if you're facing down a classroom full of students younger than their textbook.

Jack Hart doesn't deviate too much from the formula for this sort of book, but his change in point of view makes all the difference (as you will discover by reading chapter three of *Storycraft*, entitled "Point of View"). Hart worked as an editor and story coach at *The Oregonian* in Portland and also edited *Northwest Magazine*. He worked as a reporter too, but the key experience for this book is his having edited narratives. Every good writer knows that the work of the editor is essential to bringing a long piece to fruition. He can step back from the deep piles of notes and interview transcripts and get to the essential scenes, the moments that define characters, the telling details. He doesn't just edit the final draft but talks writers through the process, from story idea to reporting to structuring to polishing.

Having Hart as a guide in *Storycraft* almost rivals having a good editor looking over your shoulder. As a guidebook writer, he can offer examples from a broader range of sources—stories that he worked on, such as Tom Hallman's "Boy Behind the Mask," as well as books (Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*), magazine articles (John McPhee's

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New Yorker piece on a hazardous materials trucker), and even radio narratives (he opens the book with a scene centered on Ira Glass). He also knows that style, often the writer's first concern, is really the last thing to get added to a story. First, you need a structure.

Hart focuses on structure. After an opening chapter that pokes around some narrative theory and tries to root out why stories resonate so much with readers, Hart dives right into structure, allowing some freedom for writers to develop their own visual representations of structure (he reprints a snail-shaped John McPhee outline), but he does insist that structure be visual. He settles on a narrative arc as his standard and then comes back to it several times throughout the book as he hangs scenes onto that arc.

Hart also usefully differentiates among several different kinds of narrative. Foremost among these is the story narrative, of course, but the "explanatory narrative" gets its own chapter too and an engaging example of a story he edited in which a reporter and photographer followed a potato from a cutting-edge Mennonite farm to a McDonald's in Singapore as a way of explaining how an Asian economic crisis affected the Pacific Northwest. "Other narratives" also get a chapter, with subsections on "bookend" narratives used to liven up a dry explanatory piece, brief vignettes, columns, and even personal essays.

Speaking of personal essays, Hart ends the book with a chapter on the ethics of narrative journalism, laying out a sort of continuum of "what's ok and what's not ok" to do in narrative writing. He places the blatant fabrications of James Frey clearly at the "not ok" end but puts cleaning up quotations much closer to the other. He deals honestly and openly with the conflicting arguments about reconstructed dialogue and getting inside a character's head. A book such as Erik Larson's *Devil in the White City* gets praise and skepticism at the same time, repeatedly being used as a positive example in other chapters of the book but coming up for criticism in the ethics chapter for its imagining of details that could never be confirmed. In the end, Hart argues for transparency.

This ethical wrestling serves to intensify the impression of Hart that he gives throughout the book—that of a perceptive, helpful, and friendly editor who can serve as a terrific guide for a beginning or continuing writer of narrative nonfiction.