

Narrators in creative non-fiction: who are they, and what can we do with them?

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Writers love epitaphs—reading them, composing them, and imagining their own.

When I imagine mine, based on my experience so far, and mindful of the need to be pithy, I expect something along the following lines: ‘He came. He saw. He narrated!’

Okay, so it’s just a first draft, but it’s true. All my books have been narrated in the first person. But there’s something curious here. My personality may be all over these books. I may appear in every chapter, be welcomed in distant lands, be driven out of distant lands. Be confided in, or shunned or shot at; but none of the books is actually about me.

Bamboo Palace is about the fate of a royal family, imprisoned in the jungles of northern Laos. *The Carpet Wars* is about the crisis in Islamic civilisation in places like Afghanistan, and its impact on ordinary Muslims. *Inhaling the Mahatma* is about the curious relationship between religion and politics in India in recent years.

So why the I? And who is this guy narrating all my books?

I started writing long-form non-fiction after a few years’ working as a foreign correspondent. I’d begun to feel that traditional journalism might not be the best way to convey the essence of the people, places and events I was experiencing.

People—when you could portray them—had to be sketched in a few broad brushstrokes. Emotions—when you could convey them—always seemed hackneyed. History—if you had to include any—was always written in shorthand. The quotes rarely seemed to capture the wonderful way that real way people speak. All the gaps and silences had to be removed in the interests of brevity. Everything had to be very direct. Ambiguity was *verbotten*. There were so many bangs you could hardly hear the whimpers. The world ended up seeming like one big cartoon.

I had this nagging feeling that the whole experience, comprising thousands of individual incidents, meetings, journeys and stories, just had to be greater than the sum of its parts, and that books might be the only place in which to capture that elusive whole.

The novelist Henry James disliked the first-person narrator because he considered it too blunt an instrument to convey the nuances that interested him. To me, journalism was that blunt instrument. James was struggling to create credible fictions. I was struggling to recreate readable realities. So I started writing in the first person.

Not that the first person doesn't have its pitfalls. If you're not careful, you can end up with stories that resemble a tedious dinner guest—all I's and Me's—reducing the reader to the status of beggar at the author's feast.

And if the story isn't really about you, if you are just a vehicle for a story about someone or something else, that can be a problem.

My principal technique for avoiding this trap has been—somewhat ironically, given my penchant for first-person narrators—to keep focused as much as possible on other people and events in the story. I try not to dwell on my own reactions and avoid excessive introspection. My feelings can be read between the lines, conveyed in hints and asides. I stay focused on the action, creating a pressure-cooker crowded with incident. If I were to pause at length to reflect on things, the pressure might defuse. Worse still, it would eliminate the space that all good stories should create; the space wherein the reader decides their own intellectual and emotional response to the story.

The taciturn narrator, one who keeps his feelings to himself and resists the temptation to editorialise at every opportunity, can create narrative suspense even in stories that lack of central, driving plot. It's obvious to the reader that the disparate experiences being related are shaping the narrator's point of view, but in subtle ways that are not immediately obvious. Eventually, of course, this tension must somehow be resolved.

In *The Carpet Wars*, I recount years of war, drought and religious extremism in Afghanistan, much of it personally witnessed and experienced. I also make lifelong friends and fall in love with the landscape, the craft heritage and the unique mixture of

Persian manners and Pashtun honour that defines the country's unique culture. I also see many good people's lives smashed by political violence and turmoil.

Towards the end of the book, I reach Taliban-ruled Kandahar after surviving a head-on collision and roll-over of the car in which I had been travelling. My back is killing me, and the taxi I hire to take me to Quetta in neighbouring Pakistan breaks down in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a dust storm.

Frustrated and exhausted, I'm at the end of my tether, a physical and emotional wreck. And, noticing this, the young Afghan man sharing my taxi asks me, very sweetly and directly, why I am angry. And my strange answer to him is that it's because I don't know when, or if, I will ever see Afghanistan again. Will I ever return, and if I do, will there still be an Afghan nation, people and culture left to see? The chapter ends with the words 'Even the dust seemed precious to me then'.

Whatever power those eight words contain—and some readers found it considerable—it derives largely from the long-awaited release of a phlegmatic narrator's emotions. The sadness and uncertainty of the lonely traveller across a war-torn landscape only magnify the terrifying plight of an entire people.

Why 'I'?

There is no letter 'I' in the word 'narrator', but the 'I' is ever present in contemporary creative non-fiction, the genre in which the author uses techniques usually associated with fiction to tell true stories; realistic dialogue, often rambling or ungrammatical, strongly drawn characters, detailed observation and a sense of narrative trajectory.

First-person narration is the key to many of the most successful non-fiction books published in recent years, a voice that adds colour and warmth to subjects that are often quite dry or forbidding, making them seem inviting and accessible. It can also tie together a wealth of facts, history and cultural context.

In *Midnight in Sicily*, Australian author Peter Robb tells the murky story of organised crime in Italy, its brutal culture and deep roots in society. Although he lived in southern Italy for 15 years, Robb wasn't, as far as I can tell, personally scarred by the *Cosa Nostra*. This is not a survivor's harrowing tale, but it is told in the first person

and it is at times harrowing. The corruption trial of a former prime minister, which Robb attends, becomes a focal point. But as he explores Italy's underbelly, Robb—through his first-person narrator—is sharing his passion for Italian literature, cinema and cuisine. Yet the narrator reveals little about the personal life of Peter Robb.

So, again, why the 'I'?

Well, fortunately, we don't need to speculate about his reasons, because he has spoken most eloquently about them. Here's what he has to say.

It was not because I have any significance at all in the story I had to tell, but it was necessary to have a focus...the problem was that there was this mess of material that I had to put together in a way that at least seemed (even if it wasn't) coherent and shapely and had a certain emotional logic. The way to do that is as, indeed, a novelist does. There is the central character...a central consciousness or something, through whom events are registered, by whom other people are seen and experienced, and that was the device. I was thinking of the way Shakespeare in his tragedies both intensifies the looming tragedy and relieves the tension by introducing comedy at certain moments; it's a wonderful technique that Shakespeare does so superbly and I was thinking, you know, in a way I'll do something like this. I'll go to the trial and then I'll tell them what I had for dinner afterwards.¹

Underlying Robb's choice of the first-person narrator is his desire to nuance his story. It's not enough for him just to convey Italy's underbelly. He loves the culture, owes a debt of gratitude to it. His conscience won't allow him to demean it by a selective, sensational portrayal. The effort to do so leads him to a kind of epiphany of multi-layered realism: He says:

[T]he geographical journeys became journeys in time, the political encounters became literary encounters or artistic encounters and they invariably involved having meals, which sort of led back into the cultural roots of that food and everything...what I discovered in

Sicily was that everything was indeed intertwined and it was those real connections that enabled me to make the transitions from one part of the book to the other and weave something together that I hope, in the end, did have its coherence.ⁱⁱ

Now, of course, there could have been other ways of contextualising the mafia story. Instead of inserting himself, Robb could have balanced the tale by introducing the reader to Italians who represented the virtues he so admires. He does this to a certain extent, but could have gone all the way by embracing the third person.

So, yet again, that pesky question: why the I? (If I keep asking it, I might eventually find the answer to it.)

We all know that the novel can transcend the limitations of form and deliver profound insights into the human condition that we all share. What's new, I think, is the frequency nowadays with which non-fiction writers narrating in the first person are achieving the same thing by relying exclusively on people and events that actually existed or happened, a kind of triumph that the novel can never achieve.

My view is that this type of creative non-fiction writing—the type in which first-person narrators tell stories not principally about themselves—bears some similarities to performance art. There is an audacity about these books, a sort of Harry Houdini act in which the author recklessly attempts the impossible. Mark Kurlansky writes an engrossing history of salt. Edward Platt makes it his business to capture the drama of a road, the A40, or Western Avenue out of London.

When I wrote the *The Carpet Wars*, I broke every rule I knew about how you were supposed to write serious books about international crises. Instead of compiling data and answering the question 'Wither Afghanistan?', I decided instead to write only about things that had either moved me, or changed me. This, I believed, would bring out the best in my writing. I sat down and wrote a list of such things.

There were four words on a piece of paper: 'carpets' (icons representing creative genius), 'war' (which, when you've experienced it, does put things in perspective), 'Islam' (a civilising influence and force for good in many parts of the world) and

'refugees' (our modern gypsies, relegated to the margins of world society, unknown and unloved).

Initially, this did not seem like the recipe for a successful, or even coherent, book. But weaving and layering these elements into a readable and moving narrative became one of the most satisfying writing experiences of my life, partly because I consciously broke the chains that enslave journalists and analysts, abolished that distance from the subject that they have, and to some extent came out of the closet and started being truly honest and sincere with the reader.

You can't do that in the third person.

Humble scribes

Listening to professional writers talking about themselves, I'm struck by how often they describe their own lives as unremarkable. There really isn't much exciting about spending months and years alone at a desk struggling with words. Even those engaged in reportage, witnessing epochal events and meeting remarkable people, still tend to see themselves as humble scribes in the service of humanity.

When a famous statesman or sportsman sits down to write their autobiography, they generally go into print not as a literary act, but as an act of validation.

When a professional non-fiction writer pens their own life story, it may serve the same validating purpose, but the difference is that, for them, it's just another book. The bulk of their work will be about subjects other than themselves, even if they choose to write in the first person.

Most of the time, when they do write about themselves, it's usually in the service of someone else's narrative.

In *Maximum City: Bombay lost and found*, Suketu Mehta opens his portrait of India's largest city with a 40-page recounting of his own life, growing up in India, moving as a child to New York, and then taking his family back to India to research and write the book. It's a wonderful memoir, full of humour and wisdom, but it ends abruptly on Page 43 of my edition of the book. Suddenly, the author's first-person narrator is

sitting in a high-rise apartment in a suburb of Bombay, talking to a group of young men, Hindu extremists, about the 1992–93 Hindu–Muslim riots.

‘What does a man look like when he’s on fire?’ he asks one of them.

And, from that moment on, the book is no longer about Suketu Mehta. It’s about how India’s most cosmopolitan city was taken over by religious zealots, corrupt politicians and the criminal underworld, and how that damaged a culture.

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to ask Suketu about his unusual opening for the book, and he explained that his lengthy essay about his own ‘personal geography’ was basically a device designed to convince readers that he, Suketu Mehta, was the right man to tell the Bombay story. The moment his bona fides are established, he turns the spotlight away from himself and onto the organised crime dons, bent cops, bar girls and fanatics who are the real stars of the book. The self-revelation dries up.

In commercial book publishing today, there is a lot of pressure on authors to reveal all. A bookseller once advised me to include a few sex scenes in my books—ridiculous as that might seem. His view was that it would boost sales, regardless of whether such scenes were an easy fit with my books. Sales would skyrocket, and perhaps I would have sold more had I taken his advice. If you’re a person who has lived an amazing life—and an amazing sex life—it might make sense. But if you’re just a humble scribe, dedicated to telling the stories of others, too much ‘I’ and ‘Me’ gets in the way.

Like the characters in novels, narrators in creative non-fiction are constructed by the author in order to facilitate the telling of the story. But what determines the characteristics assigned to that narrator? How do we know what details about ourselves to leave in and leave out?

In *The Situation and the Story*, the American writer Vivian Gornick relates an anecdote that provides us with a hint as to what the appropriate criteria might be.

Gornick recalls attending the funeral of an eminent New York doctor at which numerous people rose to deliver personal eulogies. One in particular, a speech by a

young woman doctor who had trained under the great man, moved Gornick to tears, and she found herself wondering why that particular speaker's words had been so affecting. She concluded that the reason was, and I quote, that:

The speaker never lost sight of why she was speaking—or, perhaps more important, of who was speaking. Of the various selves at her disposal (she was, after all, many people—a daughter, a lover, a bird-watcher, a New Yorker), she knew and didn't forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed. That was the self in whom this story resided.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Gornick suggests, the appropriate first-person narrator is the self in whom the story resides, stripped of extraneous other selves in the overall interests of the narrative and the reader. The self-portrait thus constructed by the author must be accurate, but it can never, should never, be complete, otherwise every book would be an autobiography.

ⁱNotes

Peter Robb, 'On writing non-fiction', Transcript of interview with Jill Kitson, ABC Radio National *Book Talk* program, Saturday, 20 November 2004.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.