Narratives and Real Stories: 
Rules Governing Literary Journalism 
Gurpreet Kaur

ABSTRACT

Literary journalism, a hybrid writing style that borrows techniques from journalism and prose fiction, is being scrutinized as literature since its conception in early twentieth century. This kind of genre when read, arouse in readers the feelings of empathy and rejoining with their own experiences and sensations. Taking some fitting examples of this genre from American literature, the purpose in this paper is to identify the journalistic research methodologies which have contributed to the fictional tradition as much as what the use of literary narrative methods have meant to the journalism tradition.

Keywords

Literature, journalism, narratives, methodologies

Across time and space, many talented writers found it indispensable to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction while providing fresh insights into major and minor issues of the day. Literary journalists believe in the supremacy of objectivity and the role of story-teller as a mediator of reality. Literary journalism, being one of the kinds of nonfiction novels, is read more for its technique than content. It holds the readers in a scene, in dialogue, in character, in the revelation of a design. So, what do we call it when we find the nature of the text we are reading to be extended, mostly digressive, narrative and nonfiction, call it when we find the nature of the text we are reading to be extended, mostly digressive, narrative and nonfiction. Taking some fitting examples of this genre from American literature, the purpose in this paper is to identify the journalistic research methodologies which have contributed to the fictional tradition as much as what the use of literary narrative methods have meant to the journalism tradition.

The roots of this distinctive form of writing - whether called journalistic fiction, new journalism, literary journalism, or creative nonfiction - can be traced at least as far back as the late nineteenth century. Many popular writers from the history practicing this genre are Daniel Defoe (likely to be the earliest according to Norman Sims), Mark Twain (19th century), Stephen Crane (19th century). Authors who wrote before and after Second World War are James Agee, Ernest Hemingway, A.J. Leibling, Joseph Mitchell, Lilian Ross, John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, John McPhee, Edward Hoagland, Richard Rhodes, Tracy Kidder, Mark Singer, Richard Preston, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, and Don DeLillo. V.S Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul are some of the Indian literary journalist.

The style of Norman mailer, Thompson Herr, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and a few of the latest in journalism, may not be similar but certainly the approach is. The above writers cogently signify typical transformation of personal experience into what could be termed as a genuine presentation. The gap between fictional and factual writing has abridged to such an extent that differences between the two have practically vanished. Drawing on the techniques of the realistic novel, these writers developed a new narrative style of reporting aimed at lessening the distance between observer and observed, subject and object.

For instance, John C. Hartsock’s, A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Literary Form is the most influential book. Ronald Weber (Ed.), The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy, remains the best collection of contemporary pieces about the early controversy. Some of the essays in Norman Sims (Ed.), Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century, also deal with the journalistic fiction. Biographical and critical profiles of a number of New journalists can be found in Thomas Connery (Ed.), A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre, and Edd Applegate’s Literary journalism: a biographical dictionary of writers and editors.

Most practiced features of this genre are authors’ immersion in their subject’s worlds for in-depth research, giving more particular about accuracy of the information delivered, giving access to trivial as well as extraordinary events of real life, avoiding personal reactions, using plain and elegant simple style of writing, using a combination of backward and forward movement as per the need of plot, effective description and sceneries assuming readers responses to events. Matthew Ricketson describes the characteristics of literary journalism as: subjects chosen from the real world; exhaustive (and often immersion) research; novelistic techniques borrowed from fiction; personalized voice; literary prose style; and aims to find underlying meaning (2001: 156-157).

Using the above listed writings and analyses, the following study show how the journalist-literary figures used their journalistic research skills to create the solid, factual underpinnings of their literary themes and the powerful descriptive impressions and vivid human characterizations that have put many of their novels in the canon of great literary works. In the frontline of the new journalists are four interesting writers: John Hersey, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo. All of them have written several works that can be regarded as journalistic fiction. Here for the purpose of my study, I have chosen selected works of each author: Hiroshima (1946) by John Hersey; In Cold Blood (1966) by Truman Capote; The Armies of the Night (1968), Of a Fire on the Moon (1970) and The Executioner’s Song (1979) by Norman Mailer; Of a Fire on the Moon, Miami and the Siege of Chicago, and The Armies of the Night. The basic concern in his works is to provide great psychological depth to the portrayal of social reality.

Hiroshima’s journalistic agenda in Hiroshima, has not only provided the facts of the event, but also accommodated the needs of the American readers by providing a perceptual frame within which the events assume significance. Hiroshima represents Hersey’s most successful blending of literary technique with journalistic content, largely because it is one of his least self-conscious works. The novel is the most honest and compelling account of a morally ambiguous event in a journalistically credible fashion.

After two decades came another typical example of literary journalism which applied the innovations of John Hersey’s Hiroshima- that is, writing a book of journalism in the form of a novel. Truman Capote is regarded by many as the founding figure in the 1960s movement loosely referred to as the “New Journalism,” which sought to apply fiction–writing techniques to news reportage. ICB came out when Capote, in 1959, read a short newspaper story about a brutal murder in Kansas and couldn’t resist deciding to investigate it. Like Hiroshima, it was first published in The New Yorker and it made even more of an impact.

Norman Mailer (1923–2007) was a prominent figure in the artistic scene of America. He wrote plays, novels, screenplays, and newspaper articles, and directed movies. Mailer often criticized the American society in his writing and public speeches. Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize twice: in 1968 for The Armies of the Night and in 1979 for The Executioner’s Song. His choice to refer to himself in the third person can be seen in many articles and most of his subsequent journalistic works– including Of a Fire on the Moon, Miami and the Siege of Chicago, and The Armies of the Night. The basic concern in his works is to provide great psychological depth to the portrayal of social reality.
To achieve these ends he fuses the journalist’s concern for detail with the novelist’s personal vision.

*The Armies of the Night* is Mailer’s first celebrated piece of literary journalism, published in 1968. Mailer participated and observed the 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. Another important work of art by Mailer is *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) that depicts the events surrounding the execution of Gary Gilmore by the state of Utah for murder. The style of the book appears to be radically different from that of the earlier Mailer. Mailer tells the story from different perspectives.

Don DeLillo is one of the most celebrated contemporary American novelists. Don DeLillo’s works have established him as a talented novelist often associated with the depiction of shopping malls and supermarkets, the temples of the new consumerist creed, of a market organized entirely around consumer demand, of the detritus and waste of consumerism produced by that insatiable demand. *Libra* (1988) depicts the assassination of John F. Kennedy which inaugurated the era of media spectacle. DeLillo depicts Lee Harvey Oswald as the first truly postmodern figure, desiring his ten minutes of media fame. Oswald is a protean figure engaged in a quest for self-fashioning in terms of what the culture offers—and what the culture offers is precisely the immortality of the image. Of his numerous works *Underworld* (1997) is arguably his most ambitious. In his fourteenth novel *Falling Man* (2007) DeLillo accepts his own interrogative, imagining one family’s attempt to rebuild their lives in the dim weeks and months following the September 11 attacks. Instead of creating a documentary styled account, DeLillo charts impressionistically the complex psychological and existential rearrangements as after effects of the attacks.

Sometimes authors of literary journalism use immersion reporting and also develop intimate relations with their subjects, due to spending quite a lot of time together in the course of writing of that text. Truman Capote while writing ICB came quite closer to his subject Perry Smith to understand the subjects’ experiences. Capote had interviewed Smith extensively and featured him sympathetically as one of the main characters in his bestselling “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood.* This was may be because both had spent time in foster homes, both were victims of childhood abuse, and both turned to art for consolation. Clarke also notes, “each looked at the other and saw, or thought he saw, the man he might have been” (326). Similar was the relationship between Joe McGinnis and Janet Malcolm in the latter’s *The Journalist and the Murderer.* In this regard, Gay Talese has said, “The subjects that involve me are those that have, literally, involved me. I write about stories that are connected to my life. Although on first impression they might appear to be nonfiction that features other people’s experiences, the reason I’m drawn to them in the first place is that I see myself in them” (25). Tracy Kidder, like other literary journalists, spent a year researching the nursing home in *Old Friends,* including many weeks spent in the company of the two old men who were the leading characters. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is widely accepted as a piece of non-fiction writing. Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* or Wright’s *Native Son,* were inspired by real-life crimes and are the product of much journalistic-style research.

Literary Journalists preferred both trivial as well as extraordinary subjects. Starting with John Hersey, he had chosen no doubt the most crucial moments of his time in *Hiroshima* (1946), the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, the first of its kind in the world, but he, for giving the most accurate and relevant information to the readers, got access to the survivors, spending around one year with them.

Similarly, Truman Capote in ICB, for reporting true crime worked for 6 years with its subjects before the script was actually ready for printing. Chiasson (1999) writes that Capote recorded dialogue in full instead of partial quotes common in journalism, portrayed the characters’ mannerisms, gestures, styles, and clothing, and he also employed a point of view. Norman Mailer, on the other hand took a deep dive into the major issues of America like March to the Pentagon in AN, Apollo 11 flight in FM. The most recent author of the genre, Don DeLillo, discussed mostly the contemporary issues in his fiction using his art of writing. He has even written about waste and garbage which is again a very trivial issue but if not given attention, is gradually going to swallow the whole world.

Further the writing style used by the literary journalists is generally very simple and easy to comprehend. These writers’ language is informal, stylish, clean, and lucid and so draws the readers’ attention. Norman Mailer has, in ES, made an attempt to shift from a difficult (as used in AN) to spare style (in ES). This means authors mostly make use of active verbs, sparing of abstract verbs, adjectives, adverbs, simple sentence structure making the style clear, pleasant and comprehensible. After reading such text readers believe that they have ‘felt’ the text and therein lies the success of the author. The readers after being entertained come to feel that they are heading somewhere with purpose and thus leading to stirring of their own experiences and sensations.

Furthermore, journalistic fiction takes as its subject a broad social portraiture difficult to define topically. Mailer dealt with the whole panorama of society in *Executioner’s Song:* Gilmore’s family and friends, the prisons, the criminal justice system, Gilmore’s victims and their families, Schiller and the account of how the press helped
create the story, the state of Utah and the Mormons who figured centrally in Gilmore’s upbringing and crimes. Hollowell observes that the new journalists often wrote about personalities and phenomena unfamiliar to the average, middle-class American reader. The subject matter revolved around “emerging patterns of social organization that deviate from the mainstream culture,” such as subcultures, gangs, artists, celebrities, and criminals (40).

According to Wolfe, the new journalists were motivated by “that rather elementary and joyous ambition to show the reader real life—Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days. These are the things they do!” (Wolfe 1973: 33). For instance, John Hersey, in Hiroshima, achieves a sense of authenticity. He provides the exact location of the center of the blast, for example, which is identified as “a spot a hundred and fifty yards south of the torii and a few yards southeast of the pile of ruins that had once been the Shima Hospital” (96). It demonstrates that the precise description becomes an instrument of comprehensibility for the reader.

Another rule of literary journalism is to discount the personal reactions about other people and to show no private emotions and opinions. Readers are presented with the unemotional, conventionalized, neutral voice i.e what appears to be the fact. This genre’s power is the strength of the individual and intimate voice of a person not affected by or defending any class or society, any bureaucratic support, but putting forward his own illuminated self through firsthand experience. Similar is the case of the authors discussed above in their selected fictionally factual works. This voice comes out to be quiet sociable and authoritative. This voice is the very feature of literary journalism and so equally indispensible.

These authors include voice or an individual point of view in their works, causing them to become a character in their own story. By including their own perspective in a story, the authors cause the tale’s events to be cast in a new light. An author’s specific “voice” in any narrative can change a reader’s perspective of characters and situations, thus presenting the author as an actual presence within the body of the story. The author becomes as much a character as any player in the story, which he or she has written.

In some cases it has also been observed that the journalist and his subject in the text are one, as it is the case with ‘Mailer’ in AN, ‘Aquarius’ in Fire and the split characters of Raoul Duke and Hunter S. Thomson in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Another such explicit identification emerged in the 2005 work True Story between its author, the disgraced former New York Times Magazine writer (and fabricator) Michael Finkel, and Christian Longo, a man who, prior to telling his story to Finkel, had murdered his wife and three children then fled to Mexico where he had assumed Finkel’s identity.

In Armies, Mailer is “present” as a character, as the narrator and the author of the text as implied by the text itself. The reader may also have a glimpse of the real writer (and the public celebrity, journalist, movie-maker, arrogant personality, self-conscious egotist), who has produced the text and whose image is self-ironically described and analyzed by the narrative. The inclusion of voice and the author’s perspective is a major concern when attempting to classify a work as literary journalism. All literary journalism is expected to contain some personal elements from the author.

Literary journalism has also been said to be connected to other genres i.e there are borders between literary journalism and the surrounding forms like autobiography, fiction, science writing, conventional journalism and history. The problem arises when any author crosses the border into the other. These authors speak about the reality of the world and people as they find it, with real names and real lives. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh also noted, what takes place in literary journalism “are actual phenomena in the world accessible to ordinary human senses and, unlike the contents of fictive novels, exist outside the cover of books. The subjectivity involved in all acts of human perception of the external world does not deny the phenomenalistic status of the experiences transcribed . . . .”(226).

Literary journalists write true stories. These writers have to write within the boundaries of dialogue and scenes they have witnessed and interviewed without creating stories of their own. John Hersey, Truman Capote and George Orwell are such authors who represented real events bearing in mind the then used rules. These events were reconstructed in such a manner that it is too difficult to separate real from fictional events. Such novels as Norman Mailer’s ES also known as ‘A True Life Novel’ and Errol Morris’s ‘The Thin Blue Line’ have been called ‘docudramas’ and ‘docufiction’ by Mark Kramer in his essay ‘Essays on craft’ for amalgamating reality with fancy. In this regard, Paul Many (1996) says “journalists must tell us not only those facts which we can immediately see, but also what people know in their dreams, memories and hearts. By doing so, publications will give a fuller account of reality, allowing us to find the hope we can see in the unfolding of real events” (p.63).

Moving the text back and forth is another important feature in literary journalism. These authors speak directly to the readers, and now and then, digress using supporting information and background, previous events and then reengage the story i.e. the readers rejoin with more perspectives on the events, gained from the digressed material. Narratives contain references back and references forward (Barry 235). These kinds of
movements have been called analeptic and proleptic by Genette, in the first chapter in Narrative Discourse. This technique leads to lucid storytelling and skillful selection of movements according to the theme of the events making movements more interesting. For this the author may sometimes go into the past of characters or make use of stream of consciousness technique. Structures of these texts have also been called ‘cinematic’ in nature i.e carrying further the plot with some major and many minor narratives. For instance, the long middle section of ICB is cinematic as well as novelistic, as the narrative cuts back and forth between the killers; Hickock and Perry Smith— and their pursuers, agents Alvin Dewey and Harold Nye of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. For a journalist to recreate events require a prodigious amount of reporting, and Capote could not have written In Cold Blood had he not met the two men after their capture, obtained their sympathy and cooperation, and interviewed them for hours and hours.

DeLillo’s fiction has an achronological building of several discrete narratives that explore the protagonist’s relationship with other characters. Literary journalists have developed a genre that permits them to build stories and use digression as complexly as novelists do. The effects of the order of events and intensities to show these events have varying effects on the readers’ experience.

Literary journalism has become more interactive through its access on computer and World Wide Web with hyperlinks and interactivities. Authors can also develop creative story structures with hyperlinks for scene-by-scene construction. Sounds and visuals can express certain moods and themes (Royal, 13). Royal also says “online journalism has shied away from including lengthy pieces on a screen that would require much scrolling on the part of the user. User attention is understood to be shorter in an online environment” (22).

So in the end it can be said that by uniting the literary narrative techniques with the journalistic research methodologies like immersion reporting, accuracy in depiction, careful structure of events, etc. to depict some daily experiences and real events, literary journalists generalize the emotions, feelings and experiences of the characters. Usually the readers have a feeling of empathy and rejoining with their own experiences and sensations. Literary journalists have represented people of all strata of society, with almost all issues pertaining to life. Literary journalists have also started using computer and World Wide Web to give a more appealing and effective representation of events. Further more research in this field will definitely lead to the production of best literary journalists ever found.

ABBREVIATIONS
AN- Armies of the Night
ES- The Executioner’s Song
Fire- Of a Fire on the Moon
ICB- In Cold Blood
FM- Falling Man

WORKS CITED


**Bio-note of author**

Gurpreet Kaur is working as Assistant Prof. in Communication Skills, in Applied Sciences Department at the Institute of Engineering and Technology Bhaddal Technical Campus, Ropar, Punjab, since last six years. She has also headed the Social Sciences department in the same institute for two years. Before working here she served in Govt. Polytechnique for Women, Ropar for two years. She is also pursuing her Ph.D in American Literature. She has to her credit publication of 2 books as author, 1 book as editor, few chapters in books, and many papers in national and international journals and conferences.