REBUILDING REALITY THROUGH NARRATIVE JOURNALISM

Mihaela MUREŞAN, Assistant Professor, PhD, “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: Narrative journalism, or literary journalism, consists of writing articles that tell non-fictional stories, without changing the facts and the time of events. Moreover, this type of journalism follows the characters through the story, while actively involving them through lines and actions. Narrative journalism authors often use literary techniques while writing the true stories; from this perspective, creative non-fiction generates new boundaries between journalism and literature.

Keywords: Literary Journalism, Storytelling, Narrative Journalism, Creative Non-fiction

Creative non-fiction (also known as literary or narrative non-fiction) is a genre of writing that uses literary styles and techniques to create factually accurate narratives. Creative non-fiction contrasts with other non-fiction, such as technical writing or journalism, which is also rooted in accurate fact, but is not primarily written in service to its craft. As a genre, creative non-fiction is still relatively young.

According to creative non-fiction texts, the main characteristics are: accuracy, a literary style and technique used in building narrative texts, information transmitted as a media product that shapes in a way that reads like fiction, narrative structures of journalistic events.

Truman Capote's In Cold Blood is a historic example of narrative journalism in novel form. Published in 1965, the book was the first "non-fiction novel" and helped in showing journalists the possibility of using creative writing techniques while holding to the guidelines of journalism.

Capote first established the principles that would later guide his writing and waited for the perfect subject “not likely to darken and yellow with time” (Plimpton 1997:199). Eventually, Capote found it while reading the New York Times while reading a short story entitled Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain. “After reading the story it suddenly struck me that a crime, the study of one such, might provide the broad scope I needed to write the kind of book I wanted to write” he later said (Algeo 2009:102). The book tells the story of a wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and two youngest of their four children who were found bound and gagged and then shot at close range. It seems, however, that the author was not interested directly in the murders, “what Capote wanted to discover was the effect of the killings on an isolated community, its inhabitants and the family itself” (Keeble 2006:133).

Capote concentrated the people involved in the tragedy and outside observers. He conducted interviews with various people, including the murderers and especially with Perry Smith, whom he had followed even through the execution. Capote later recalls: “I was there. I stayed with Perry to the end. He was calm and very brave. It was a terrible experience and I will never get over it.” (Keeble 2006:134).

Actually, Truman Capote is the “parent” of the narrative journalism, by getting an idea of doing a serious big work, as he confessed – it would be precisely like a novel, with a single difference: every word of it would be true from beginning to end.
Study Case

An impressive narrative text is signed by the journalist Lee Hancock and named “Choosing Thomas” and it tells the readers the drama of a couple of parents who welcome a baby into the world despite knowing that he will not survive. The two-part serial of the narrative journalistic story was published in The Dallas Morning News (http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/stories/083009thomas_part1.11b5ace4.html) and it had a high impact upon the readers.

Hancock uses straight chronology for the journalistic story, beginning with the ultrasound medical control experience at which parents T.K. and Deidrea Laux discover their child will have so many physical problems, such as: a cleft palate, enlarged kidneys, and many additional medical disorders. All those problems seemed to be a result from a genetic condition known as trisomy 13. Hancock wisely divides the piece of the article into two parts: the parents’ prenatal struggles, followed by Thomas’ short life and its legacy. The focus on Thomas’ death keeps the piece from devolving into the “gee-whiz” highlighting of medical technology that so often occurs at the expense of the story. But the power of this serial narrative owes as much or more to Hancock knowing when to get out of the way and when to make use of her detailed notes. She includes gallows humor from T.K., who makes a joking request for a camouflage casket at the funeral home, months before Thomas’ birth. And then she tells us that the cemetery official agrees to hold the plot until after the birth because Deidrea is not ready to give up. “What if there’s a miracle?” she asks. Hancock’s interest in the piece began with reporting on palliative care for newborns and adults, not statement about the parents’ choices when receiving the trisomy diagnosis. An interesting moment occurs in the piece when the Lauxes are contacted by a young couple facing a similar situation whose pastor has warned them against abortion. Hancock writes, “Deidrea spent an hour reassuring the husband that people who hadn't been there couldn't understand the choice they faced.”

This excerpt from The Dallas Morning News is an example of literary journalism or creative non-fiction.

Thorough investigation

Every single fact, scene or piece of information presented in the text is thoroughly researched and extremely well-documented as it is proven by the videos that were taken by the family, during their drama. The purpose of journalism is to accurately inform the receivers of the message, that is to say, the readers, viewers or listeners, attempting concurrently to draw attention towards the subject in question. Undoubtedly, a journalist’s duty is to present reality such as it is, without embellishing it, without inventions, lies or misinterpretations. As the author herself points out, the story is based solely on true events, not on fictitious elements or facts. The information is accurate, well researched and interesting to read.

The theme

Another characteristic of creative non-fiction, which also features in the text, regards the theme. The theme may not be peculiar or uncommon; nonetheless, the journalist’s angle of approach is the essential element which singles out and individualizes the story, endowing it with its own mark and unusualness.
This article is a narrative journalistic one and it treats, in an informative and creative manner, a very sensitive subject. Choosing a subject for a literary journalistic text is vital in this process of constructing the text. The subject chosen in this article is related to society, to family drama, to obedience in front of the destiny. This story of two parents who really want to have a baby and to raise him is true and is indeed unique, because the event is not presented just as elementary news. It is a nonfictional story, presented in a journalistic way and it individualises the event. From a news perspective, the answer to the question What happened? would be Two parents found out that their unborn baby will not survive after he will be born, because he has several diseases. The story is elaborated as a narrative journalistic text and the answer to the same question is that a very nice couple of two wonderful people, named Deidrea and T.K. Laux, who desperately wanted to have a child, found out that their precious unborn baby, already named Thomas, is diagnosed with a very rare disease called trisomy and that their beloved unborn boy will not survive after the deliver.

The plot/ the conflict/ the action

Among the traits of creative non-fiction distinguishable in the text and which are also particular to literature, we may count the existence of a plot or of a conflict. The plot and the action are essential. While reading a production particular to narrative journalism, one must be able to detect and follow the story line. In our case, the plot unfolds gradually. The scenes described above follow each other naturally and chronologically. The plot lies in the drama of two parents.

As we can observe, this true story has characters and it emphasizes the drama of two common parents who are about to take the most difficult decision of their life, in order to terminate the pregnancy or to continue it by keeping the baby. This experience that is shared to a very large audience fits a journalistic event that can be presented in a journalistic text. Also, it is to be told because it regards the whole society, the activity of parenting, the religious believes, the hope and the fighting and not giving up when someone’s on the edge, life before child birth, facing death, expecting new life, true love and so on.

From this perspective, the news that treats the following event: perinatal hospice offers choices and resources for parents when infant’s death is imminent, is presented as a storytelling that fits the contemporary culture. News as narrative is to be found in this journalistic text. Journalism is approached as story also because we can observe that, generally speaking, the stories of one culture are not so different from one another and many of them are pretty the same. Through narrative journalism, the stories of all people are being told, just because effective news speaks to the audience through story frames that resonate. In this sense, journalistic stories help construct the world in specific ways, by engaging the audience.

The scenes/ the setting

The text is created as a script or as a movie. The scenes are so vividly described that they practically flash before our eyes, this being a trait specific to literature. Throughout the article, one can distinguish the description of the setting and of several scenes meant to give vividness to the facts spoken of.
Description/ figures of speech/ imagery

The style of this article is a segregating one, because it constructs a grammatically simple sentence, expressing a single idea (Kane 2000:161). Generally, a segregating style consists of a series of such sentences, which are relatively short, uncomplicated, even though some of them may not be simple in the grammatical sense. This kind of style sentences is especially useful in descriptive and narrative writing. They analyze a complicated perception or action into its parts and arrange these in a significant order. So, the short and uncomplicated sentences break the scene into a series of tableaux, each rendered without a comment. The effect is to distance us from the action, yet the technique is not that of a callous observer, but of an artist willing to let the event speak for itself (Kane 2000:163). In narration, this kind of style is effective, because short sentences create variety.

Also, in the construction of sentences, Lee Hancock uses the cumulative sentence, which consists of an initial independent clause followed by a number of subordinate constructions which accumulated details about the characters, places, main event and message. This kind of sentences appears most often in some descriptions.

At the beginning of the article, Lee Hancock draws a general picture, then fills in the details. The second sentence is constructed in a balanced sentence style, because it consists of two parts roughly equivalent in both length and significance and divided by pause: The void split a cloud of light that ebbed and flowed into the shape of a human fetus. Also, the style of Hancock's writing uses the fragment as a single word, a phrase or a dependent clause standing alone as sentence: Hard decisions., This was a big day., You OK?, “Camouflage!” T.K. Declared.

Concision is another feature of Choosing Thomas, because the text consists of well-written sentences that are clear, significant, descriptive and interesting. Clarity means that it says to the reader what the writer intended to say; interesting, that it reads well, attracting us by its economy, novelty, sound and rhythm (Kane 2000:191). Concision is brevity relative to purpose and it is not to be confused with absolute brevity.

In this narrative journalistic report we can find, like in the classical construction of a narrative text, a kind of introduction, a kind of initiation, a kind of resignation, climax and resolution, based on reality, on a true happening, on a story between hope and despair, a story about a soul between life and death. The story is based on interviews, observations and it is impressive through both the story and the style.

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