

University of Canberra

Matthew Ricketson

The perils of writing interior monologues in narrative journalism

Abstract:

The interior monologue is perhaps the most controversial element of what is variously called narrative journalism, literary journalism, creative non-fiction or narrative non-fiction. Many practitioners and critics argue it is impossible to accurately convey a person's innermost thoughts and feelings while some say that it is possible, if difficult. A small minority are unconcerned by any issues that may arise in journalists and other non-fiction writers writing interior monologues for the subjects of their stories. There is certainly no consensus on the issue. This paper examines what it is about the interior monologue that makes it so contentious. It draws on a review of contemporary practice and criticism, including an analysis of views offered by 19 leading practitioners interviewed by American scholar Robert Boynton and on interviews conducted by this paper's author with leading Australian practitioners: John Bryson, Helen Garner, Chloe Hooper, Malcolm Knox, David Marr and Margaret Simons, and on analysis of the work of another, Estelle Blackburn. This review of contemporary practice is presented as suggestive rather than conclusive. It finds only seven of the 26 practitioners have written interior monologues.

Biographical note:

Dr Matthew Ricketson is an academic and journalist. He has worked in the Australian news media, at *The Australian* newspaper, *Time Australia* magazine and, most recently, as Media and Communications editor for *The Age*. He ran the journalism program at RMIT between 1995 and 2006 and in 2009 was appointed inaugural professor of journalism at the University of Canberra. He is the author of a biography of Australian author, Paul Jennings, *The Boy in the Story is always Me*, a journalism textbook, *Writing Feature Stories*, and edited the anthology, *The Best Australian Profiles*. In 2010 his PhD entitled "Ethical Issues in the Practice of Book-length Journalism" was awarded by Monash University.

Keywords:

Narrative non-fiction – creative non-fiction – literary journalism

One of the many claims in Tom Wolfe's much applauded, often contested and rarely ignored 1973 essay proclaiming a "New Journalism" is that the interior monologue is a distinctive, if not unique, feature of the novel and that it is the element of narrative writing that is furthest from what is known in the media industry as hard news reporting. This did not give Wolfe pause – no surprise to those who have read his brilliant, shamelessly self-promoting essay. With a characteristically insouciant sweeping aside of concerns, Wolfe conceives of this level of intimacy in journalism as simply "one more doorbell a reporter had to push" (*The New Journalism* 35).

He pointed to a profile magazine article he wrote in the early 1960s of Phil Spector that describes how the pop music producer felt as an airplane readied for take-off: "All these raindrops are *high* or something. They don't roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling, like all those Mr Cool snow heads walking on mattresses" (*The New Journalism* 34). When asked about Wolfe's hyperkinetic portrait, Wolfe wrote that Spector confirmed the passage was "quite accurate". This did not surprise Wolfe as it was founded on his long interview with Spector (33).

Conversely, 35 years later when H. Porter Abbott, a leading scholar of narrative, came to update his *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* he took the opposite view. For this second edition he included a chapter dealing specifically with the relationship between narrative in fiction and non-fiction and he writes that unless historians and biographers – and by implication practitioners writing what has been termed literary journalism, narrative non-fiction and creative non-fiction among others – are making things up they cannot report or record in the same way as a narrator in fiction can about their subjects' inner lives (148-9). Abbott cites a vivid internal account from Henry James' *The Beast in the Jungle* and comments that what works so well in James' novella "Would raise all kinds of alarm bells if you found it in a text claiming to be history" (149).

I will argue in this paper that both these views, but especially Wolfe's, need to be challenged and qualified. The implications of writing an interior monologue for a work of non-fiction are far more complex and challenging than Wolfe concedes, but for Abbott to argue that the interior monologue is "strictly speaking, not available to the historian" and, by implication, to other writers of non-fiction, is to fly in the face of a body of non-fiction that attempts to do just that. This includes works from Gay Talese's 1964 portrait of boxer Floyd Patterson after losing a heavyweight title bout to Sonny Liston (Talese and Lounsbury 106-121), to Truman Capote's portrait of convicted murderer Perry Smith in *In Cold Blood* (1966), and, more recently, from Richard Cramer extensive use of interior monologue in his account of the 1988 American presidential campaign, *What it Takes*, to Richard Preston's more modest use of it in his 1994 book about the Ebola virus, *The Hot Zone*. This is far from an exhaustive list. For instance, in Mark Kramer and Wendy Call's selection of talks given to the annual narrative journalism conference (published in 2007), Jack Hart, managing editor and writing coach at *The Oregonian*, describes the interior monologue as a "staple for successful narrative nonfiction writers" (*Telling True Stories* 236).

I will further argue, drawing on published interviews with leading American authors of non-fiction and on my own interviews with six leading Australian practitioners plus an analysis of the work of a seventh, that use of the interior monologue in non-fiction is practiced today by only a minority of practitioners, and is seen by the majority as highly controversial. The ‘meat and drink’ of daily journalism are facts, whether observed by the journalist or drawn from official documents, and quotations from those making or drawn into the news. Putting to one side legitimate questions about what exactly constitutes a fact, I want to draw a contrast between this level of work aimed at representing events and people and the interior monologue, which is a device usually associated with fiction.

The interior monologue is “the written representation of a character’s inner thoughts, impressions and memories as if directly ‘overheard’ without the apparent intervention of a summarising and selecting narrator” (Baldick 111). Its aim, then, is to give the reader access to the thoughts and feelings of a character. A novelist can do this without qualm as they create their own characters and can give them any thoughts and feelings they like, but for non-fiction, which seeks to represent actual people, the question immediately arises: how does, indeed how can, the practitioner know with any certainty what a person is thinking or feeling? As journalists are often accused of misquoting a person’s spoken or written words, how can they be confident their efforts to represent a person’s thoughts and feelings will be credible?

There is an important set of questions practitioners can ask themselves to guide their use of interior monologues: how important is the monologue to the article or book, how much cooperation has the subject of the monologue provided to the journalist, and how well known is the subject of the monologue to the reader? Readers will also ask how they can trust the veracity of what they are reading, so what can writers do to build a relationship of trust with their readers? With these questions in mind, let us return to Wolfe’s profile of Phil Spector, as a number of critics remain unconvinced by Wolfe’s assurances. Jack Fuller, a journalist and novelist, asks whether the passage fairly represented what Spector thought and felt at the time or whether this was his apparently gleeful description of it later. “The man on the other side of the door often lies about his inner state. He may even lie to himself” (“News and Literary Technique” 148-49). Fuller’s point is apt but also not surprising, and prompts the question: why does Wolfe place unblinking trust in an interview as a means of understanding exactly what a person thought and felt at a given moment?

Wolfe does not address this question in any detail in *The New Journalism*, but at the time he was writing, few other practitioners were either. By 1980, John Hersey, a pioneer in narrative journalism as the author of a groundbreaking account of the dropping of the first atomic bomb, *Hiroshima*, examined Wolfe’s use of interior monologue and argued that the most distinctive element of the interior monologues Wolfe creates in his narrative non-fiction work, *The Right Stuff*, is how most of them sound like him. Whether these passages were the monologues of astronauts, their wives or even a chimpanzee test pilot, Hersey writes, “Right Stuffers who are alleged to speak nothing but Army Creole are garlanded with elegant tidbits like *esprit*, *joie de combat*, *mas allá!*....God help us, God becomes Tom Wolfe and with His sweet ear chooses the Wolfeish ‘ninny’” (“The Legend on the License” 255).

Hersey's answer is a good one even if he understates Wolfe's ability to adopt different narrative voices, such as, for instance, the southern drawl of pioneering airman Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff* (45-46). Hersey also perhaps misreads the tone of Wolfe's interior monologues. That most of them hum with the current of Wolfe's energy and comic brio draws attention to Wolfe's artifice; that is, what Wolfe does is a form of impersonation that he performs for the reader and, with this in mind, the reader is not perhaps expected to take these passages as a literal attempt to render a person's (or a chimp's) thoughts. This raises a further question, though: does Wolfe always rely on in-depth interviewing and "his sweet ear" to produce a fair representation of his subjects' innermost thoughts and feelings? Not always, according to Daniel Lehman, an American academic and former journalist. He argues that in his 1968 work of narrative non-fiction about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe sometimes writes interior monologues for people he gives no indication of having interviewed (*Matters of Fact* 59).

There is only marginal support among current practitioners for Wolfe's unclouded view of the ethical difficulty of writing interior monologue. Jack Hart's description of it as a "staple for successful narrative nonfiction writers" has been mentioned already but in the same volume, *Telling True Stories*, Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute warns that use of the interior monologue is a "dangerous strategy" that is permissible in "the most limited circumstances" (168). Theodore Cheney, in his textbook on creative non-fiction, writes: "In the hands of the inept, or the ept but unscrupulous, it is an easy device behind which to hide unethical writing behavior" (222).

Robert Boynton is a journalist and journalism academic who directs the literary reportage program at New York University. His 2005 book, *The New New Journalism* includes interviews with nineteen leading American practitioners, all of whom have written at least one work of book-length narrative journalism and most of whom have written several. They are: Ted Conover, Richard Ben Cramer, Leon Dash, William Finnegan, Jonathan Harr, Alex Kotlowitz, Jon Krakauer, Jane Kramer, William Langewiesche, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean, Richard Preston, Ron Rosenbaum, Eric Schlosser, Gay Talese, Calvin Trillin, Lawrence Weschler and Lawrence Wright. Boynton's comprehensive interviews – the book runs to nearly five hundred pages – explore a range of topics, including how and whether practitioners use various narrative approaches to represent actual people and events in non-fiction. Preceding each interview is an introduction to the practitioner, including critical reception to their works, but Boynton does not analyse his interviewees' statements. The interviewees' candid and thoughtful reflections, then, offer a rich source of primary source material for this paper.

Among Boynton's interviewees, only five say they write interior monologues or, where they were not asked the question directly, it is clear from statements in their own work or from other critics' work that they have. These practitioners are: Cramer (*What it Takes* ix), Harr (Boynton *The New New Journalism* 118), Kramer (Lehman *Matters of Fact* 46-47) Preston (Boynton *The New New Journalism* 302, 321) and Talese (*The Kingdom and the Power* 529; *Honor Thy Father* 516). Wright appears to have changed his view between 1994 when he included interior monologues in *Remembering Satan* (202) and his interview with Boynton a decade later (454). Of the

others, ten did not discuss it and the remaining three – Lewis (Boynton 264), Orlean (Boynton 288) and Trillin (Boynton 401) – strongly oppose use of interior monologues.

Preston (Boynton 296) and Talese (Boynton 363) have both written interior monologues without attracting the criticism levelled at Wolfe, but both appear to have gained full cooperation from their sources, including for extensive checking, and both write about relatively unknown people. Talese gained such complete cooperation from the son of a Mafia boss for his 1971 book *Honor Thy Father* that the criticism he drew was not for presuming to know another's thoughts but that he became so close as to lose his sense of perspective about organized crime (Boynton 354). In *The Hot Zone*, Preston's book about an outbreak of the Ebola virus, he writes an interior monologue for a military scientist, Nancy Jaax, at the moment she fears (wrongly) that she might be infected, and she is annoyed she has forgotten to go to the bank that day. Preston told Boynton: "It rang absolutely true when she first described her thoughts to me. But then I went over it again and again until I was finally sure that this was – to the best of her recollection – what she thought at that moment." (Boynton 321). Cramer, however, writes interior monologues for presidential candidates, which attracts intense scrutiny both from the principal sources and from critics. It does appear, however, that Cramer was thorough. In a note to the reader he writes that he interviewed more than a thousand people and that "In every case, thoughts attributed to the characters in this book have been checked with them, or with the people to whom they confided those thoughts" (ix). Cramer provides no endnotes, however, and this coupled with his habit of writing about well-known, important people with slangy intimacy – he refers to Republican Bob Dole as "the Bobster" – drew criticism for reincarnating "Wolfe's faded New Journalism technique" (Boynton 34).

For my doctoral thesis on ethical issues arising for practitioners of long form narrative journalism, I conducted semi-structured face to face interviews with a number of leading Australian practitioners: John Bryson, Helen Garner, Chloe Hooper, Malcolm Knox, David Marr and Margaret Simons. Each interview took between ninety minutes and two hours, and each required at least one, briefer follow-up interview by telephone. The work of another practitioner, Estelle Blackburn, was examined but she was not interviewed as she has written a detailed account of how she produced a work of book-length journalism, *Broken Lives*, in her 2007 book *End of Innocence*. These writers were chosen for several reasons: because they have produced landmark or controversial works, because they have written both journalism and novels, because they have spent time reflecting on journalistic practice, or for a combination of these reasons.

Of these Australian practitioners, only two (Blackburn, Bryson) say they have written interior monologues, while four (Garner, Hooper, Knox and Marr) say they do not. One (Simons) was chary but would not rule out the practice completely (Personal interviews). Of the Australian practitioners, Blackburn's work contains the most extensive use of interior monologue – and the most problematic. Published in 1998, *Broken Lives* was the prime impetus for the re-opening of the cases against John Button, convicted in 1963 of the manslaughter of Rosemary Anderson, and Darryl

Beamish, convicted in 1961 of the murder of Jillian Brewer. At that time another man, Eric Edgar Cooke, had confessed to killing both women. Cooke, however, was a convicted serial killer and his confessions were disbelieved or ignored by police who had already obtained confessions from Button and Beamish. Blackburn's exhaustive re-investigation for her book led eventually to the overturning of Button and Beamish's convictions. It is rare that works of narrative non-fiction have such a specific, substantial affect.

Broken Lives reconstructs the accounts of the individual hit-and-run victims, and tracks between Button's life and Cooke's crimes and his execution in 1964. The book's editor, Zoltan Kovacs, said the first draft read like a "series of police rounds stories" (*End of Innocence* 185) prompting Blackburn to rewrite, trying to "colour it up" and "breathe life into the characters" (*End of Innocence* 163). At Kovacs' urging she attempted to write an interior monologue for Cooke, not to excuse him but in an effort to explain (*End of Innocence* 193). She interviewed a psychologist and two psychiatrists who knew Cooke and sought to imagine his thought processes as he committed each of his many crimes:

A powerful new urge stole over him, rising from the deep bitterness within. He felt a surge of irresistible excitement as the idea took shape. It was more than his usual need to mock the mockers by taking the things they held dear. This was more – this was an urge for more power and a realization that he had more power (*Broken Lives* 46)

It was over. He'd had his fill of revenge. That feeling left him – that feeling of power that made him light, coming over him like a mantle or cloud, telling him he must use the gun. He didn't know where it came from, his heart or his head, but it was strong – stronger than an impulse or an urge; a power as though he was God, with power over life and death (*Broken Lives* 164).

She was sleeping on top of the bed, wearing just a flimsy nightie; virtually nothing to hide her nakedness. The feeling that had been stirring all night grew stronger. It was a balmy night, thoughts of young love had been on his mind since the previous day.... He could have her and avenge himself again (*Broken Lives* 219).

Blackburn felt she had restored Cooke's humanity rather than repeat his tabloid portrayal as the cold-blooded Nedlands Monster (*End of Innocence* 193). The attempt is sincere but to me the interior monologues reads like a Gothic novel, in phrases such as "a powerful new urge stole over him," "that feeling of power," "telling him he must use the gun," "thoughts of young love had been on his mind" and "he could have her and avenge himself again." Cooke's family complained to her after the book's publication for "daring to know what their father was thinking" (*End of Innocence* 231). She sympathized and explained her intention. She asked the family to specify what was wrong in her portrayal of Cooke and interpreted their silence as suggesting "an emotional basis to their complaint" (*End of Innocence* 232).

Another way to interpret their silence is that they were unable to say what was wrong because they did not know what their father was thinking before he committed crimes for the simple reason that they were not him. That underscores the difficulty of writing an interior monologue in narrative non-fiction. To attempt an interior monologue of someone who is not only dead, but also responsible for horrific crimes

– Cooke committed necrophilia on the woman described in the passage above – seems close to impossible to achieve. The potential benefit of gaining at least some understanding of Cooke seems outweighed both by the likelihood of offending the surviving families and appearing to be voyeuristic.

It is not impossible, then, to ethically write interior monologues but it is certainly difficult and so today it is more common for practitioners to avoid them. Michael Lewis told Boynton he disapproved of journalists such as Bob Woodward claiming to capture their subjects' inner thoughts. "I don't believe it for a second. His characters end up having the capacity to feel only what Bob Woodward feels. And it is always the *same* feeling" (264). David Marr, Chloe Hooper and Susan Orlean all say they are content to know that not every element of fiction-writing is available to practitioners of narrative non-fiction (Personal interviews; Boynton 288), and Malcolm Knox says he feels no pressing need to write interior monologue "because I am not a frustrated novelist who is writing non-fiction" (Personal interview).

This analysis of interviews with 19 American practitioners of narrative non-fiction and of the work of seven Australian practitioners offers suggestive rather than conclusive findings. All but seven of these 26 leading practitioners avoid interior monologues in their work on the grounds that they are too difficult to do successfully, that the margin for error is too great, the consequences of failure too serious and, finally, because many believe the interior monologue probably really belongs in the domain of fiction writing.

Works cited

- Abbott, H. Porter 2008 "Narrative and Truth", *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2002 2nd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 145-159.
- Baldick, Chris 1990 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Blackburn, Estelle 1998 *Broken Lives*, Claremont: Stellar.
- Blackburn, Estelle 2007 *The End of Innocence: The Remarkable Story of One Woman's Fight for Justice*, Prahan, Melbourne: Hardie Grant.
- Boynton, Robert 2005 *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*, New York: Random.
- Bryson, John. Personal interview, 2 July 2007. Follow-up interviews, 12 March 2008 and 28 May 2008.
- Capote, Truman 1966 *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*, New York: Random House.
- Cheney, Theodore 1991 *Writing Creative Nonfiction: How to Use Fiction Techniques to Make Your Nonfiction More Interesting, Dramatic – and Vivid*, California: Ten Speed Press.
- Cramer, Richard 1992 *What It Takes: The Way to the White House*, 1993, New York: Vintage.
- Fuller, Jack 1996 "News and Literary Technique", in *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 131-64.
- Garner, Helen. Personal interview, 29 January 2007. Follow-up interview, 20 February 2008.

Hersey, John 1989 "The Legend on the License", in T. Goldstein (ed) *Killing the Messenger: 100 Years of Media Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 247-67.

Hooper, Chloe. Personal interview. 16 March 2009.

Knox, Malcolm. Personal interview, 3 July 2007. Follow-up interview, 20 February 2008.

Kramer, Mark and Wendy Call 2007 *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*, New York: Plume.

Lehman, Daniel 1997 *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction over the Edge*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Marr, David. Personal interview, 28 February 2007. Follow-up interview, 17 March 2008.

Preston, Richard 1994 *The Hot Zone*, New York: Doubleday.

Simons, Margaret. Personal interview, 29 November 2006 and 19 March 2007. Follow-up interview, 20 February 2008.

Talese, Gay and Barbara Lounsberry 1996 *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality*, New York: HarperCollins.

Talese, Gay 1969 *The Kingdom and the Power*, London: Calder & Boyars.

Talese, Gay 1971 *Honor thy Father*, London: Souvenir Press.

Wolfe, Tom 1973 "The New Journalism", in T. Wolfe and E.W. Johnson *The New Journalism*, 1975, London: Picador, 15-68.

Wolfe, Tom 1979 *The Right Stuff*, 1991, London: Picador.

Wright, Lawrence 1994 *Remembering Satan: A Tragic Case of Recovered Memory*, New York: Vintage.