



## Writing Like a Guy in Textville

### A Personal Reflection on Narrative Seduction

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**Abstract** This narrative explores the idea of “narrative seduction.” Though an autoethnographic account the author shows how he learned to read and think about the masculine qualities of prose associated with “writing like a man” in the academy, and how this insight led him to locate his ethnographic voice in opposition to it. The narrative includes some stylistic observations about the author’s own “seductive” prose and its relationship to intimate listening.

*Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.*

Robert McKee

*Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently.*

*If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation.*

*Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art.*

*It remembers that it was first song.*

Jorge Luis Borges

I have been told I write “like a man.” That my style is distinctly “masculine.” So how does one write “like a man”? How do I textually create “me” within a context of others?

I maintain that narrative style — my narrative style — is “masculine,” in part because it is less “disciplined.” I write in a blend of narrative ethnography and creative nonfiction,<sup>1</sup> which is to say that I borrow elements of style from novels, poetry, drama, performance, and investigative journalism while working from the point of view of a communication detective/scholar.<sup>2</sup>

There are other masculine qualities.

I assert myself, even my most vulnerable self, boldly. Always in the first person singular. I do not often hedge my claims with false modesty or self-doubt.

I like short sentences. Like Hemingway: "The beer was cold." But I am not averse to writing very long ones. Like Faulkner. Or like I imagine Faulkner.

I love single sentence paragraphs.

If I use a long paragraph I am speaking in a rush and trying to get in all the details like they are occurring right now and this moment is immediate and there is no way I can get it all in if I break it up because I'll have to pause to take a breath when I change to a new paragraph.

Hey, in that last paragraph, I was just warming up to long.

I'm always up for a good laugh. Or, to put it differently, I think Kenneth Burke is right when he says that when facing down a crisis of any kind, there are really only two responses: comedy or tragedy. And only comedy offers hope or a way out of it.

I like finding ways out of it.

And ways into it...like *this*:

*Take South Carolina #15 exit off I-85 heading up from Atlanta at the legal speed limit, pause at the stop sign at the end of the exit ramp, and—if you are prone to consider the meaning of such things—you see that you are now at a complex intersection of American culture. This place—this intersection—displays local histories, regional politics, and deep, dangerous—ultimately spiritual—conflicts. What are these stories? What is this place all about?*

*Intersections, like political elections, force you to look left and right, to make choices based almost entirely on what you imagine you see in the light of what you believe. To the right, toward Anderson, are familiar signs of God-fearing, gun-toting interstate existence. Here are the popular corporate icons to fast self-service gas to which are now attached square two-color convenience stores specializing in the open sale of sugar-coated, high-calorie nothings displayed seductively in brightly colored plastic wrap; cold no-deposit, no-return soft drinks and primary American beers in cans; multiple extra-strength pain relievers, caffeine tablets, and gas alleviators; NASCAR models, caps, and memorabilia, Confederate flag T-shirts and pro-gun, anti-Clinton, kiss-my-ass bumper stickers; and public displays of criminal nicotine sold here at discount prices. Next door are the blessedly close reassurances of personal decay; faster, greasier, deadlier foods—friend antibiotic cow slathered with melted fat on bleached bread—slopped with special sauces or dressings, topped with*

*chemically treated vegetables, served in cartoon-coordinated paper cups and bags. These are sources only of instant gut gratification for obvious needs that fast gratifying and plastic never fully satisfies, but that interstate travel or just the everyday velocity of life induces. And yessir, there are the never-clean locked restrooms “For Customers Only” sweetly stinking in the rear, and a quarters-only pay phone stripped of local directories that has long served as a public astray and vomitorium outside by the loud highway, down at the inconvenient but legal edge of the property, where hearing and safety is severely, maybe purposefully impaired.*

*To the left—toward Clemson—is an authentic, perfect white southern mansion fronted by a small private pond and surrounded by a highly ornate iron fence and naturally intoxicating magnolia and oak trees. You can use it to momentarily imagine a gone world that probably never was, fill in the imaginary blanks with movie scenes and heavily accented dialogue, just as you always have. Across the highway from this white elegant elephant are two competing gas station/convenience stores, a new Wendy’s, and behind them an unnecessarily long, somewhat ironic, curving drive up a man-made hill that leads not to another perfect white mansion but to an Outback Steakhouse, a Cracker Barrel restaurant/mini Southern country theme park, and an overnight inn of interstate proportions.*

*You have been here, we all have. If not this road, then some other one. If not this dream, then one you imagine as purely your own.*

*On the highway now—a four-lane blacktop upon which are painted huge orange tiger paws—continuous, fast, competitive traffic from elsewhere seems always to be going somewhere and doesn’t pause at all for this admirable, astonishing view, as if this conflicted place, this intersection and all it suggests, only exists if you want it to.*

*You want it to. (Goodall, 1996, pp. 27–28)*

Like my poetic hero Walter Whitman, I show myself to be thoroughly male, a bit of a showman, a songmaker whose songs celebrate life, my life, your life, what I see and what I dream; a lefty, and little lazy, definitely dangerous, and unrepentant, like *this*: (Listen)

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

*My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,*

...

*Hoping to cease not till death.*

*Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,  
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy (Whitman, 2005/1855).*

Nature without check with original energy. As a man, you gotta love that!

I'm no Walter Whitman, but like him I infuse my poetry with scholarship, and my scholarship with poetry. I hold myself accountable. I'm not always the nice guy, not always the politically correct guy, nor do I come without personal and political baggage. Like *this*:

*"We are in rural Dixie when we are in the regions of this North Birmingham, which is not really North Birmingham but is called that just the same. We are in the rural Dixie of my imagination, or at least the parts of my imagination that have been informed by a particular, privileged reading of history, novels, heresay, and films. This is a mythical, substandard land where Confederate flags still blazon the rear windows of dangerous pickups, pickups that proudly display gun racks upon which are mounted real guns, driven by thin, angry women who say to hell with the surgeon general and who bear military children for larger, less articulate, unkempt and hated men who say to hell with everything except you and me, and I ain't so sure about you. In my imagination those guns of theirs are always loaded, those women are always sucking the death out of red-box hard-pack Marlboros, and those men are always laid up half-drunk or just plain mean. Every one of them is in real and constant need. They live in houses that need paint, that need furniture, they have children who need clothing and education, wives who need consciousness and better hygiene, husbands who need understanding and more liberal God.*

*"There is just no way that any of these needs will be met, so in my mind they just hate everybody and everything that cannot be generically reduced to their own rotten sameness or is not genetically related to them. In my mind all they do is drink, fuck, shoot, and hate, and in my mind they hate, most of all, just me. They hate me for what I am, and for what I'm not. I can feel their hatred in*

*convenience stores, liquor stores, in the heat of their stares that dare me to cross over some unknown line in various American parking lots. I might as well be black, this might as well be fifty years ago.*

*“But this is all in my mind.*

*“The truth is much harder, and far more complex. My sense of hatred is partly projection derived from the nervous edges of fear, and partly from the guilt I feel, as Kenneth Burke puts it, from being ‘up’ when others are ‘down.’ I am the one interpreting those houses, those women and children, and those stares. I am the one attributing significance and meaning to the unknown within of the Other, seeing myself as someone meaningful in the stuff of their lives, someone worthy of the deep hate that, in truth, is part of what I hope for. As if their hatred justifies me, my choices, my place in the commonweal, my mind. And in this privileged mental territory of my own cultural construction I grant no room for individuality, much less bricolage, to the Other; I fear the mere possibility of human connections between me and them based on the joke of a life that rushes us all too quickly to nowhere, regardless of our birth, looks, language, or money, and that requires us all to pay taxes along the way, taxes that are taken from wages that are never enough, wages that take time away from a life that is never enough, when what waits for us is the great trapdoor at the bottom end of the twentieth century that should mark our common tombstones thusly:*

*This citizen was born, reared, and educated,  
Got a job in order to consume,  
Consumed like hell,  
Was famous, locally, for it  
Realized that no matter how much was consumed it was  
Never Enough,  
Then retired,  
Then died.*

*“These are my thoughts as I pull off the main highway onto a two-lane blacktop that degenerates into a poor dirt road riddled with potholes, both real and imagined. We pass an old Ford that crashed into an oak tree and burned long before I was born and whose charred skeleton lives still by the side of the road. The air is dense and still. An old blue-tick hound ignores our passing, or maybe just ignores me, or maybe is just blind” (Goodall, 1991, pp. 179-180).*

*Stories are equipment for living.*

Kenneth Burke

*In the critic's vocabulary, the word "precursor" is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotations of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.*

Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and his Precursors"

The first ethnography I ever read was Gerry Philipsen's classic "Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville" (1975). I was then in my doctoral program at Penn State, the class was rhetorical criticism, the professor was Dick Gregg. Gregg was passionate about criticism, alert always to the unique role critics of rhetoric inhabit in the universe of discourse, interested in getting us to think about what today we call "vernacular rhetorics" (Hauser, 2008), or what way back then he called "everyday speech practices." He selected Philipsen's piece because he saw clearly — and rightly — that speech codes derived from ethnographic studies would add a whole new dimension to our storehouse of knowledge about the powerful ways in which rhetorical forms and forming shape how we know and what we know about.

For a self-styled radical guy like me, then much younger and far more bumptious, reading Philipsen was a revelation. The idea that I could leave the Pattee library and its lovely dusty ancient rhetorical tombs — the remains of the dead — and instead walk outside into everyday life where things often get really interesting and write about it *as a scholar*, well, *damn*, that was a real life changer for this rhetorical bad boy.

At least in my head.

In truth, it took me many years to get there. While my bad boy head soared free and wild into intersections of rhetoric and ethnography, my body remained firmly in the stacks of old Pattee, those lovely dusty library tombs where I dutifully and with a kind of necessary doctoral self-importance about the whole thing read the dead and wrote term papers and then a dissertation about them. By which I mean to say only that on my way to a narrative manhood of a nontraditional sort, I acquired an intimate literary familiarity with the skilled communication practice (Craig, 2006) known as "crafting the scholarly essay," complete with the requisite habits of mind, body, and especially hands that are disciplined to create straight, upright, and mostly cautious but coherent intelligent arguments out of the imagined breath of ghosts.

But somewhere in the nether reaches of my forebrain, was always Philipsen. Philipsen was, of course, something of a metaphor. Because in truth it was more *what he did* than how he did it that pulled me in. It was the lure I heard in his ethnographic urgency to engage lived experiences, to listen to the talk and observe the habits of cultural others, and, in the process, to arrive at something intellectually useful as well as narratively interesting. My ears longed to listen like that, to write from that place. Lurking like lust lurks, the urge to listen is at the heart of ethnographic narrative seduction, a hot little spot just below the surfaces of you and me and possibility, a flame in waiting, desperate to be touched off.

Listen to “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville.” Classic. Eloquent. Cool. And hot. It is a voice theory rich in its incisive and insightful application of speech codes to the talk (and its noticeable absence) among blue-collar workers in an urban American setting, the south side of Chicago, circa the early to mid-1970s. Back when America had really big muscles but had lost a war, and with it, some of its confidence and swagger. Back when there were still plenty of machinists, and steel workers, and factories, and gasoline was 35.9 cents per gallon. Back when driving a foreign car, *any* foreign car, was a sign of rebellion, if not insanity. Back when publishing an article in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, like Philipsen did, really meant something to everyone in the communication field, not just your mother and close circle of like-minded friends.

If you haven’t read it, you must. Working from Dell Hymes’s (1967; 1968) theory of “speech communities,” and an “ethnography of speaking,” Philipsen begins the essay with a subtle but powerful observation: “talk is not everywhere valued equally” (1975, p. 13), and goes on to tell us how the measure of man in Teamsterville was in his acquired local knowledge of when to speak, when to remain silent, when to form his body into a threat, and when to resort to violence. If you are an outsider, listening to man-talk in Teamsterville may seem coarse and almost wooden, its surfaces blunt, nuanced, if at all, by swirly knots of local dialect against the everyday grain of known clichés that reinforce accepted beliefs and values. Think Rocky Balboa. Or the three young, patriotic men who head off to war in *The Deer Hunter*. Or *The Magnificent Seven*. Remember the “tough guy” characters in Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer novels and all those other pulp fiction and great literature since that depict men poised on the edge of danger, strong but silent, wary of women, keeping the code and cracking wise like Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe as played by Humphrey Bogart in “The Big Sleep” (1939).

By contrast, as Philipsen shows, for those who know it and use it and live it and sometimes die because of it, the talk of men in Teamsterville reveals to those trained to listen, a far richer vehicle for understanding membership in a *community*: “speech

is seen as an instrument of sociability with one's fellows, as a medium for asserting communal ties and loyalty to a group, and serves — by its use or disuse, or by the particular manner of its use — to signal that one knows one's place in the world" (p. 42). If the dialogue sounds wooden, and if the silences are deep, Teamsterville talk (and its absence) is still a many, manly, splintered thing.

What is this "place in the world?" As with all social constructions of identity, we find it located narratively within a mythic ideal. For example, hear it in this description of the ideal male *noir* hero, from Raymond Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder":

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.

If you, as a reader or as a listener, identify yourself with that kind of ideal, you seek others who share it. A like-minded community, if you will, composed of people who "talk the talk and walk the walk."

You kind of make a fist when saying the words aloud. Flex a little.

Reading that Philipsen piece and imagining all of the manly precursors and movie referents and cultural icons that work to support it makes me think of those factories and mills and mines and the working class Pennsylvanian guys I knew from back in Philly or Philipsburg or Pittsburgh, guys I hung out with and often admired, and I hear us drinking cold American beers, swapping jokes, oogling women, trading insults, and telling lies. True men. Real men. Men who kept secrets, and kept secret their pain, and all too often hit when it hurt, instead of telling anyone about it. These guys I knew didn't talk about pain. *Ever*. That was part of the code of honor. Part of being a real man from the working classes not just in Chicago's South Side, but anywhere in America, in any American town.

I knew these men and this code, I could and did perform it, and as much as I loved it and our shared community, I also hated it and our shared community. I loved some of these guys like brothers and fathers, but I badly wanted out of "the life," out of that very there that was everywhere in that culture, out of that working class culture and *please God* out of that Teamsterville code.

Which is why, in all my naivety, I stayed firmly planted in my seat in the study carrel at Penn State University, in that dusty tomb among the stacks reading the dead and learning to write like a regular disciplined scholar in Old Pattee.

I didn't yet connect the ethnographic dots from Teamsterville to Scholarsville. I knew only that I wanted to learn how to "speak like a man" in the academy.

The Philipson piece called to me. Beckoned. But I didn't yet know how to truly *listen*.

Reading it I thought I was in control of this narrative, this rite of passage into the scholarly life. That by choosing that life I was lifting myself out of all that I had known. I was moving ahead. That the codes for scholarly conduct in the academy were going to be different, that I could replace the *noir* with the *noetic*.

I was just so naïve. *So naïve.*

The Goodall that was me back then constructing that storyline had indeed heard Kenneth Burke's words about "the thatness of this, and the thisness of that," but this "wry codicil" (1966, p. 16) had only been one memorable part of an otherwise forgettable class discussion then. Too, the Goodall that I was in that time and place had not read Philipson carefully. I didn't pay enough attention to Philipson's cleverly nuanced argument about the relationship of "neighborhood" to "places" for speaking: "[A] Teamsterviller's sense of neighborhood is a lens through which he [or she] locates speech, socially, physically, and hierarchically. 'The neighborhood' is the most macroscopic concept that Teamstervillers use to distinguish places in general from places for speaking" (p. 35).

But I wasn't really listening. Focused as I was on learning how to speak like a man, I had neglected to learn how to listen like one.

Which is to say only that my seduction, my narrative seduction, was not yet complete.



*The universe is made of stories, not atoms.*

Muriel Rukeyser

*A writer — and, I believe, generally all persons — must think that whatever happens to him or her is a resource. All things have been given to us for a purpose, and an artist must feel this more intensely. All that happens to us, including our humiliations, our misfortunes, our embarrassments, all is given to us as raw material, as clay, so that we may shape our art.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Narrative seduction. What's *that* all about?

In a truly existential sense, narrative seduction is why you and I are gathered here around this story. Expectantly. We are storytellers and story listeners, and we are hungry for and easily seduced by well-told tales as well as adept at telling them. We take sensual pleasure in bodies warmed by words, in breath caught by surprise by a sudden turn in the action.

Is it any wonder why one thing leads to another? With the likes of *us*?

Seduction is the third form of reasoning, equal if not superior in suatory power to traditional induction and deduction. But unlike those two traditional forms of reasoning, the power of seduction is less about discovering and disseminating revealed truth than it is about imagining possibilities, living in and playing with dangerous ambiguities, mixing in the experience of flirtation and desire, and ultimately, giving in to the storyline, giving it up, every inch of ourselves, to the sweet allure of surrender.<sup>3</sup>

Now, that said, there are some among us who argue much the same passionate way for the power of induction and deduction, who find in a well-formed body of proof or the beauty of entailment the perfect turn-on. And of course there are those who find epicurean delight in all delectable forms of discourse, who hunger equally for the salty and sultry seductions of narrative as well as the intricate oracular ins and outs of an argument that leads to a thoroughly satisfying, even if sometimes surprising, climax.

Maybe it's all about sex after all.

Do ya *think*?



*I wrote the story myself*

*It's all about a girl who lost her reputation*

*but never missed it.*

Mae West

No, that's too easy. It cheapens the narrative.

Everything is *always* about sex, anyway, so even if true, it doesn't help. Doesn't teach us a thing that isn't already obvious. It's titillation in the late afternoon with no hope of a nightcap.

So let me begin again. Call me Finnegán!

Sorry. Sometimes I crack myself up. But I won't do that again. Not in this text. Promise.

Here's the story so far: Boy goes to grad school and emerges a traditional man, a disciplined scholar capable of writing and reading the scholarly essay. He lives like that

for a while, but with increasing discomfort. There is a noticeable absence of pleasure in his texts. He finds that he associates the traditional scholarly form of argument, its inductions and deductions, its perverse fetish for long bibliographies, its absence of any emotion except anger, with a deep cultural parallel to the speech habits of Teamsterville men that he thought he had escaped.

Not Finnegan. But Philipsen, again.

Or, upon further reflection, was I simply eating the same textual meal while seated at a different textual table? Was I becoming what Bertold Brecht called a consumer of “culinary theatre” (see Dolan, 1991, p. 106) instead of actively interrogating the conservative representational forms that idealized, indeed, *mythologized* sense of male social order, that rendered meaningful what “speaking like a man” could mean not just in the neighborhoods of Teamsterville, but *anywhere*?

In other words, had I been seduced by the sirens song, the sensual promise, of speaking like a man in Scholarsville without noticing it was a seduction? Without realizing that it was the same manly song, the same manly chorus that had so successfully seduced me back in *Teamsterville*? Had I so thoroughly failed to listen for “the thisness of that, and the thatness of this?”

Think about it this way:

Teamsterville men were made men by their habits of speech, and their speech was linear, predictable, argumentative, filled with deep emotional holes and awkward silences. Their bodies were like well-formed arguments tightened into threats. And when the manly proof of action promised by those silent menacing bodies wasn't enough, all that was left was violence. Agree with me or *die*, you bastard!

So much of the Teamsterville speech code was too much like arguments made in our traditional scholarship. Although I've only heard of a couple of fist fights breaking out over theories and methods in the communication field, an outsider wouldn't be able to tell it from reading some exchanges that define disputes in our journals. Or that condone the violence written into caustic reviews of articles submitted for publication. Or which poison the occasional tenure or promotion letter, with paragraphs chock full of compli-sults and barely disguised envy cloaked in clear disdain.

I had succeeded only in moving from “speaking like a man” in Teamsterville to writing “like a man” in Scholarsville. I had changed addresses, moved “up” in the world, but discovered myself to be living and working in the same neighborhood. The same rules of order — of who could speak, and when to speak, and what was appropriate to say in the neighborhood — still applied. The conservative speech code that defined what it meant to be a true and disciplined man (or woman) was — and is — in many ways made of the same code of manly honor, the same painful silences, and the same

strong community sanctions against any utterance considered personal or private, as had been the speech of those men in Teamsterville.

The “manly” form of scholarly argument, and the correct-for-our-neighborhood format for a scholarly essay imposed rules for the conduct of scholarly communication that I felt were imitative and restrictive.<sup>4</sup> The following excerpt, drawn from an earlier work of mine on the subject, explains it:

*Because I was searching scholarly literature in the Communication culture, and because my aim was to discover something about the way that literature was composed, I turned my attention to an analysis of the form of scholarly work. What I saw was that the basic prose formula for what I—and so many others—had written as traditional scholarship followed a predictable pattern:*

**Introduction**

— Gain the attention of the audience by identifying the general issue I plan to pursue within an existing body of literature

— State a thesis or argument that I plan to prove or demonstrate

— Provide a preview of the main claims to be advanced in the body of the essay

— Offer an inducement (i.e., what the reader derives from reading the piece)

**Body**

— Review and critique the relevant literature to establish your credibility as a researcher

— Clearly identify the existing “gap”—the problem—in the literature

— Fill the “gap” with a solution, such as a new argument and relevant supporting evidence

— Include an application of the new argument to a piece of discourse, a narrative, a conversation, whatever

— Derive “important” or “significant” new findings or conclusions from the study

**Conclusion**

— Review and summarize the essay, emphasizing the relevance of the new idea to an ongoing line of inquiry

— Make suggestions for future research

*It was obvious to me, as I am sure it is to most of you, that this form for expressing scholarship is very much like the standard format taught to students*

*for making a problem-solving persuasive speech. Or, at least this is what we in the Communication field endorse as a standard format for that assignment.*

*It occurred to me that the most persuasive speeches I'd heard outside of a classroom were not delivered according to this standard formula. Martin Luther King, Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech, John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, and various sermons, lectures, campaign speeches, and depictions of passionate public address in popular films were definitely not delivered according to the approved format. Uniformly, they were more creative, and, in most cases, poetic. The speakers spoke less from prescription than from their hearts. They treated their audiences as partners to the speech, not passive receivers of it.*

*Hmmmm.*

*How could this insight, simple as it was, apply to written forms of scholarship? Could there be an analogy between alternative forms of public address and alternative forms of qualitative writing? My hunch was, there was. Like any good detective, I followed the leads provided by the clues. In this case, I went out in search of it.*

*Which meant I went into the library.*

*One clue inevitably leads to another. Then to another. And so on. Some don't pan out, others do. What I was searching for, I thought, required me to retrace what I perceived as a bifurcation of persuasive forms in public address. But I was wrong. As long as I perceived scholarly writing as only a form of public speaking, and alternatives to it as some one thing that was disconnected from my personal history and experiences, this mystery would only deepen. I was imprisoned by a conceptual framework of my own rhetorical making.*

*I was searching for a literal comparison when I should have been looking for a metaphor (Goodall, 2000, pp. 48-49).*



The metaphor I eventually stumbled upon was that writing, like speaking, is about creating a *relationship*—an intimate relationship—with readers and listeners. From there I was just one short inference away from seeing the intimacy-building aspect of scholarly writing as a seductive, but loving *conversation*.<sup>5</sup> This was, for me, a radical departure from my training as a Teamsterville orator. By contrast, I learned to think of readers as intimate listeners joined by language and by storyline. Viewed this way, readers of intimate scholarship would be attuned—just as in intimate conversation—to voice, to what Roland Barthes calls “the pleasures of a text” (1975). Viewed this way—as lovers rather than as fighters—readers parsed the meanings of words

and passages as if searching for resources of trust, and of personal identification with the storyline, and along the way, they enjoy what they are reading with the bare facts and feelings drawn from their own lives, their most secret interests, and their own life stories. Viewed this way, at least for me, the most appealing intimate conversations on or off the page featured personal narratives, creativity in language, the use of humor, and risk.

When I realized all that back in the early-1980s, I knew that when I was writing like a man in Scholarsville I hadn't moved so very far away from Teamsterville after all. I resolved to change my writing style. I wanted to combine my training in rhetoric and social science research with literary journalism. I would approach writing as I approached the construction of a meaningful writer-reader relationship, and bring to that relationship, to that intimacy, everything I knew about becoming the kind of man in a relationship I had always wanted to become. As a *mystery to be engaged*, not as a problem to be solved. Written as a detective explains a case, fully implicating himself in it, not certain how it might turn out, focusing the storyline on how it was that I came to know. I would become a writer, a scholar, who told stories people wanted to read, rather than articles they were forced to read. As a result of those resolutions, I made the personal choice to turn to narrative.

I surrendered to the mystery. And found myself writing like a guy in Textville, a discursive space constructed partly out of what I had learned in Scholarsville, partly out of what I admired about the men in Teamsterville, and partly out of writing done in the style, and with the perspective, of detective fiction.

The result was the first book length ethnography published in the communication field, *Casing a Promised Land: The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer* (1989).<sup>6</sup> The book contains a series of interconnected stories about ways in which communication organizes high technology and materialist cultures, including accounts of a computer software firm, a shopping mall, the Star Wars command, adult Space Camp, and an academic conference.

An earlier story that should have been included in *Casing* because it so clearly sets the *noir* detective tone, begins like this:

### ***Suspicious Minds, Early Clues, and Lunch***

*His name is Edward R. Seeman.*

*"Call me Ed," he commands as we shake hands. We are doing the usual male thing with the squeeze, each one of us applying a little more pressure until it becomes just uncomfortable enough for one of us to release. Because he's paying the tab, I release, although I don't want to. Call me Ed, I muse. Call me Ishmael, and his name is Seeman. Where's the whale?*

*Equity thus restored I follow him to a table, each of us eyebrow admiring for the benefit of the other the significant nonverbal aspects of the hostess's rearward appearance. In the background is Muzak. It is going to be one of those lunches. I knew there were reasons I got out of this business.*

*Ed is about my age but makes better money and spends large sums of it on clothing. Today he is decked out in Esquire's full-page three-button double-breasted fall insert from two months ago, the heavy Italian designer influence from the cut of the lapels to the point of the shoes, given added weight by the brand-new Rolex Mariner. I appreciate the thematic unity here, but discount some important points due to a decided lack of originality. For my role I am costumed in standard College Professor from the Eastern Liberal Establishment duds, blue blazer against beige Land's End cotton twill trousers, tasseled loafers, light-blue button-down Sero with, literally, the old school tie.*

*Clearly there is a cultural clash between us. We sit across from each other as two representatives of foreign lands, and the negotiations begin as all negotiations do, with strategic choices of drinks and food.*

*"I'll have a double vodka martini," Ed orders, "with Absolut."*

*"I'll have unsweetened ice tea with extra lemon," I add. In the old days I would follow the alcohol lead but I always felt mildly foolish when I did. Before that, on cases like this one, back when I was just out of graduate school and really poor, I drank the booze because it was free.*

*Ed leans forward, his Rolex catches the light and sparkles. "I saw Phil Davis at the Heritage Club last week," he grins, "and when I told him about my little problem he recommended you."*

*Thanks, Phil. I try to restrain myself from saying something like "Phil's an ass, which verifies my initial impression of you," but instead settle for a milder form of insult. "The Heritage Club, huh? Well, my fee just went up."*

*Ed ignores it. In the world we are currently constituting there is a tacit understanding clearly in place about his social and professional attainments; I prefer not to reveal as much about my own. Sometimes they come in handier if you don't.*

*About Phil and his recommendation I am less certain. Phil Davis hired me a couple of years ago to look into a 'communication' problem in an aerospace manufacturing firm that ended up being a cleverly masked excuse for a consultant's report that would blame a particular department for something that wasn't its fault. Phil didn't know this, but he played along as if he knew something, which in a way is worse. I didn't play along, ended up going*

*undercover in the organization to discover the truth, , and wrote a very different sort of report. In the end nobody got hurt, I got paid, and everyone, including Phil, looked good.*

*But Phil also knew I had done more, and less, than I was asked to do. So this could mean that Phil thinks I will do the same for Ed, or something entirely different. He could be getting even.*

*By the time the food arrives—his rare beef and my Cobb salad—I have a vague idea about what Ed wants me to do. The problem is ‘mid-level managerial dissatisfaction’ that is causing ‘high turnover’ and ‘other problems’ (unspecified, but I get the hint that they involve the law). Ed believes this is really a ‘communication’ issue and wants me to do ‘the sort of thing you did for Phil,’ complete with a report.*

*‘What sort of thing did I do for Phil?’ What I am after is some sense of the level and depth of the lie Phil probably told this guy about what I did. I am, of course, grinning a good bit, to communicate the understanding that I don’t have as if I really do.*

*Ed gives me a good looking over before he replies. In his eyes are questions about my machismo, my ability to do what needs to be done, my attitude toward my work, toward Ed, toward Phil. The choice of iced tea and Cobb salad didn’t please him, and I don’t seem as willing to go along with all of this as Phil apparently told him I would be.*

*Ed clears his throat, wipes his mouth, flashes a million dollar smile. ‘Phil told me everything,’ he replies.*

*‘Really?’ I try my best to seem impressed.*

*‘He told me that you saw through the bullshit to the sensitivity of the problem and that you did some fancy steps that protected his ass.’*

*‘Hmmm.’ Figures that’s what he would have said.*

*‘What’s that mean?’ He means my ‘hmmm.’*

*‘Hmmm means hmmm,’ I say. It’s a form of talk that I use when I’m considering something.’*

*He relaxes. ‘Oh, you mean money.’ He smiles. ‘I’ve been authorized to pay you \$5,000, plus any other reasonable expenses.’*

*I chuckle. ‘Phil must have lied about how much I’m worth.’*

*‘I don’t think so,’ Ed replies. ‘Of course, you will need receipts for the expenses.’*

*‘Of course,’ I say. ‘I’ll take \$2,500 now, and the remainder when I turn in the report.’*

*'Fine.' He reaches for the corporate checkbook. His signature is huge and illegible. He hands me the down payment.*

*'I'll keep this is a safe place until I decide whether or not to take the job.'*

*He tries hard to avoid looking stunned. 'What do you mean?' His face doesn't know whether to smile or frown, so it does both at the same time and awkwardly.*

*'I mean I never take a consulting job without doing a little background work first.' I learned that a long time ago. It keeps me out of trouble and I sleep better too.'*

*I stand up and throw down the money for the meal and tip. 'I never disclose my methods until I solve the case. I'll call you in a few days to tell you whether I'm working or not.' I smile and offer my hand.*

*He shakes it. This time I do the squeezing. I squeeze hard.*

*He gestures toward the money I have just thrown down on the table. 'That isn't necessary, this is on me. I invited you, remember?'*

*'It was a joint venture. We haven't agreed to anything yet except I'm not going to cash your company's check until I look into a couple of things. If everything looks like you've said it will and I take the job, you can buy my lunch later. Until then, I pay my own way.'*

*'It was a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Goodall.' He frowns in earnest, now giving himself away, but adds, 'I think.'*

*'Good. Thinking helps. I'll be in touch.'*

*(Goodall, 1989, pp. 42-46).*

I had written myself into a new style of scholarly manhood. Into Textville. I had *listened* to what I knew in my heart to be true.



*Language is an oral phenomenon. . . .*

*In all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to related somehow, directly or indirectly to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. "Reading a text" means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high technology cultures.*

Walter Ong

*Being with you and not being with you is the only way I have to measure time.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Listen:

I wanted to become a different kind of guy. A better scholar. A more interesting writer. More compassionate in my attitude toward others, better tuned to my own feelings, including those of anxiety, ambiguity, care, and vulnerability. More able to engage the complexities of human situations and bring to them a new narrative understanding rooted in communication.

I had always been better seduced by narrative anyway. I don't know why I was trying so hard to pass on the other side. To prove myself, maybe. To prove myself *worthy*, no doubt.

Which is to say, simply, like men do, to "measure up."

So, long story omitted, after the success of *Casing* I decided to continue to write what I'd like to read. I wrote stories about politics, about rock n roll, about football as religion, and a whole lot of other things connected by communication practices to organizational cultures in the American southland. To find the storylines, I finally left the library and re-entered the world. I relearned the value of writing that engaged my senses, that moved me, that made me laugh. That made me cry. That made me *feel* again.

I engaged mysteries with real people working out how to deal with crises and left "filling the gaps" in our literature to other men and women. I stopped trying to write like a *faux* feminist, which I had really only done to attract women anyway, and instead just opened up my storylines with honest, not always flattering, critical self-reflection. Writing this way, I learned why it was important to show my own vulnerability, to see and account for my own complicity in the situations and the human lives I was writing about. One consequence of that work was that I found my voice.

I wrote myself into speaking like a different kind of guy, a different kind of man in a rock n roll Textville *noir*.



*No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.*

*No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.*

Robert Frost

My narratives are intended to be intelligent, hopefully enjoyable conversations between us — between you and me — that are less about keeping secrets and maintaining silences, or arguing our way into fights, than they are about showing the depth and complexities of life mysteries and challenges, about how we choose to communicate with each other, and how through those choices we learn to think about how we live,

how we make sense as well as a mess of things, and, someday, how we make peace with death.

As John Van Maanen says, “we learn to write ethnographies by reading ethnographies” (1988). That is true, but I also believe we learn to write well by reading *outside* our disciplines and subjects, and by bringing to our craft lessons from other genres. In that, I have had many excellent teachers. From “the beer was cold” spare descriptions in Hemingway to Fitzgerald’s symbolic green light on Daisy Buchanan’s shore to Raymond Chandler’s wise-cracking Philip Marlowe to Barry Hannah’s many-storied stories, I have honed my style from a lot of masters, stood, for just a moment or two, on the shoulders of narrative giants. And I haven’t even listed the espionage and crime novelists who taught me plotting, character development, and dialogue; or the creative nonfictionists who taught me to write in scenes, to bring in histories, and to make productive use of footnotes; or the films and plays and poems too numerous to mention, all of which provided rich resources for me to think with and to write with.

And to be with you with.

Admittedly, my list of author heroes is mostly made up of men. Maybe it is because I “get them.” Or maybe, in Textville as in Teamsterville, it is that as a man the voices of other men speak to me. I don’t know. I just know they do.

In these great writers vibrant masculinity comes through a distinct voice and character. But there is something else, something more democratic, more vulnerable, less linear, more fluid, more evocative in their language. There is something powerful in their stories that enable readers to play inside the text by teasing us with rich verbal hi-jinks, by playing our music and inviting us to party.

For every set-up we know there will be a pay off. Guys love that.

For every metaphor or simile there is an underlying reason in support of a theme. Detectives know that.

“So it goes.” Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. said that. He understood the mystery, the comedy of tragedy, the lack of big conclusions. He was that kind of guy. My kind of guy.

So it was that in my quest to write like a man I went to an imagined academy of writerly men, a place to practice the fine art of narrative seduction, a place made to explore with language what Lee Gutkind calls “the literature of reality”<sup>7</sup>; a place that I think of as a good room with a bed and you in it, and the great possible textual magic connecting us intimately all through the night.



*It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.*

Italo Calvino

Is it a seduction? Well, okay, then it is a seduction, but it's a mutual one. It is a pleasure we *each* take in the text. And through it, in each other.

What is the key to a successful narrative seduction? Surely you know.

It is in the ear. Open to the voice that enters it. And thereafter, together, we make a beautiful...storyline.

## Notes

1. Formerly referred to as "literary journalism."
2. For more about my use of the detective metaphor, please see H. L. Goodall *Casing a Promised Land: The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer* (1989).
3. The concept of "surrender" is vital because it is not the equivalent of "submission." Surrender is done willingly; submission is not. Linking surrender to narrative seduction in relation to writing means, for me, that agency is shared between author and reader, speaker and listener. And within that shared space, we make the dream of mutual understanding, pleasure, and satisfaction possible. That's the hope for a man such as me. That is my writerly idea, and my readerly ideal, for a better masculinity.
4. One aspect of this same point is elucidated in Blair, Brown, & Baxter (1994), an article about "disciplining the feminine" voice and perspective through a critique of what they experienced with a manuscript in the hands of a group of conservative male editors.
5. There is a long history of connecting forms of discourse to forms of intercourse, at least since Plato in *The Phaedrus*. For a more contemporary view that compares forms of argumentation to rape, seduction, and love, please see Brockreide (1972). Brockreide remains true to Plato's distinctions, but I depart from them in that I see narrative as distinct from argumentation, and therefore see narrative seduction as an integral part of intimate communication, relation-building, and ultimately love, rather than distinct from it. My view is also indebted to Kenneth Burke's theory of rhetoric as courtship, wherein a union ("consubstantiality") is predicated on close identification between speakers and listeners. Within Burke's theory of progressive form is the key to all narrative seductions, for "form begins in desire and ends in satisfaction." For further explication, please see Burke (1931; 1968).
6. *Casing a Promised Land* is actually the first book in an ethnographic trilogy about American culture. The other volumes are *Living in the Rock n Roll Mystery* (1991) and *Divine Signs* (1996).
7. Please see his comprehensive website at: <http://www.leegutkind.com/main.html>

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