

Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald (editors)  
*The Writer's Reader: Understanding Journalism and Non-fiction*  
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Reviewed by Rachel Morley

THE genres of literary journalism and creative non-fiction have traditionally held vexed positions in news journalism and scholarship. Conservative critics have long taken umbrage with writers who develop, as part of their reporting style, a consciously subjective methodology that brings the “eye” that sees into contact with the “I” that experiences. As Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald, co-editors of *The Writer's Reader*, note at the beginning of their edited book, there remains a small contingent of critics who still “cling doggedly to the bogus notion that objectivity is an outcome that can actually be attained” (p.x).

Yet as this highly readable collection of non-fiction essays and articles demonstrates, an engagement with the self and with the imaginative spaces of storytelling need not negate the demand for truthful and accurate accounts. Each of the 19 stories that appear in the book elegantly combines an unwavering commitment to accuracy with an impressive attention to detail, clarity, and balance in a bid to take readers beyond the bare bones of “fact” and deep into the heart of the issues at hand. Whether working within the realm of the news feature, the public profile, or in the genre of memoir, each story is united by an insightful approach to craft and by the writer's talent for storytelling. One of the underlying principles behind the collection was to find writers who not only report on the world, but who “also tell important stories about the human condition, about the choices we make and the actions we take” (p.2).

With this in mind, Eisenhuth and McDonald have made judicious choices in their selections, which aim to traverse eight strands of non-fiction writing – news, new journalism, profiles, investigative reporting, essays, memoir, place and travel . The book includes essays and articles by 20 writers, including Joan Didion, Arundhati Roy, Robert Fisk, Helen Garner, Annie Dillard, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, both of whom collaborated in their investigative reports on the Tampa. Ten of the writers are Australians, which gives the collection a refreshingly local focus.

*The Writer's Reader* represents a particularly good introductory resource for students, a deliberate move on behalf of the editors, both of whom teach journalism in the Australian tertiary sector. Each of the eight chapters begins with a brief preface by either Eisenhuth

or McDonald, and includes interviews with at least one of the featured writers as part of a broader exploration of the writing process. The chapters conclude with a series of questions which are designed to stimulate discussion and debate.

The tone is non-prescriptive and non-didactic but instead, like the genres it considers, favours an open-ended approach to style, theme and range. The editors do not press for definition with regard to the categories deployed, a decision which, in many ways, is to be expected given the fluid nature of the forms. And yet, while it is clear the editors seek to 'show' by example, rather than "tell" through theory, a clearer explanation of the heterogeneous nature of terms such as "literary non-fiction" and "new journalism" would, nonetheless, guide students more readily through the minefield of issues that arise when beginning to work with these forms, particularly with regard to what contributor Pico Iyer calls "new journalism's" niece, "creative non-fiction" (p.212).

This becomes most apparent in the sections of the book where the editors raise generalised questions about the established boundaries between conventional journalism and "literary writing" (xi), and the way conventional notions of objectivity are affected when techniques and strategies usually associated with fiction collide with the world of fact. While the ethical issues of working with the truth and avoiding the temptation for fabrication are canvassed throughout, students may struggle to understand the ambiguity that comes with leapfrogging terms such as "literary and creative" onto the non-fiction back. It is left to the writers in the interviews to clarify the general position which, while effective, could be better served by anchoring their responses with a clearer statement from the editors themselves on how these terms function within the sphere of the book.

This, however, is a minor quibble. On the whole, *The Writer's Reader* is a strong and stimulating anthology, and as the essays themselves show, the real emphasis is on craft and technique, as revealed by the featured writers. The inclusion of Fisk is likely to present students with no better example of a contemporary reporter who so precisely and immediately draws his reader into the horrifying world of war, a world where children are "torn to pieces" (p.10) and where a little girl is found with a "head full of metal" (p.13). Fisk's 1996 news feature on the conflict in Lebanon makes for a devastating read. The writer's lens zooms in on the village of Mansouri where "Apache helicopters are hovering like wasps in the pale blue skies above them," and then back out to the American businessmen whose company produces the missiles that kill them (p.11). His attention to detail and fine-tuned sense of the narrative arc of a story is outstanding and demonstrates, with utter clarity and conviction, the power of narrative voice.

Kathy Evans's Walkley Award winning memoir on giving birth to a child with Down Syndrome is another example of how a willingness to move beyond the detached mode of conventional reporting and into the more nuanced microcosm of the story has the potential to bring the reader closer to what Iyer calls "the mystery as well as the clarity of life" (p.212). "Tuesday's Child" takes the reader through the early days of the birth, and recounts in a chronological fashion, the mosaic of emotions that arise – love, sadness, grief and fear – as she and her husband attempt to understand "the nuclear fall-out of our dreams" (p.155). The result is provocative and heartbreaking and an excellent example of the way memoir can, as the editors assert, "break silence and assert authority" (151).

With inclusions like these, and accompanying features such as Greg Bearup's highly amusing profile on Sydney judge Roddy Meagher, John Birmingham's report on the S11

protests, and Roy's personal reflection on living in the shadow of the nuclear age, *The Writer's Reader* cannot fail to impress, despite the ambiguous use of terminology. This is an excellent introduction to some of the best practitioners of the non-fiction form and will be a welcome inclusion in journalism and writing courses.

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