

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-70033-7 - The Writer's Reader: Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction  
Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald  
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# The Writer's Reader

Who will apologise for children's lives lost in Iraq? How do you force a big company to take responsibility for damaging the health of its workers? What do you do when you suspect a famous author is a fake? How does it feel to be on the receiving end of police crowd control? Or on a hillside, spellbound and fearful, watching the light being sucked from the sky during an eclipse?

Top writers and journalists who have written about events and issues big and small talk frankly about how they approach the task in this highly readable new collection. *The Writer's Reader* combines selected non-fiction articles with interviews with authors reflecting on the process of writing. Academic writing can be dry and dull, but this refreshingly accessible anthology values straight talking about writing and argues that if you want to write, then you should be reading.

**Susie Eisenhuth** is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**Willa McDonald** is a lecturer in media and writing at Macquarie University.

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## Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction

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This book is dedicated with love to our children Tian and Toby.  
And with gratitude to those writers whose storytelling enriches all our lives.

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# Preface

Our intention in putting this collection of non-fiction together was to put the focus squarely on the importance of reading other writers. We asked a lot of writers what their best advice to aspiring writers would be. ‘Reading, reading, reading’, said Pulitzer Prize winning US journalist and author Barry Siegel. ‘You need a sense of story. Where do you get a sense of story? You get a sense of story by reading stories.’ Non-fiction author and journalist Helen Garner offered almost the self-same mantra. ‘Read’, she said. ‘Read, read, read.’ She put an extra ‘read’ in there for emphasis, we noted, along with a very Garneresque addendum ‘(And don’t use too many adverbs.)’

Writer and journalist John Birmingham, known for tilting at traditional boundaries and urging an edgier approach to non-fiction in general, nonetheless came on like a martinet on this question, recommending a punishing regime of ‘four hours a day reading, four hours a day writing’. (‘And a cup of tea in between.’) Journalist and non-fiction author Mark Mordue, whose music journalism helped to fund his early writing career, cites the influence of British *New Musical Express* writer Paul Morley, ‘whose wit and intelligence demonstrated that a good magazine article or review could have all the grace and structure of a fine short story or essay’. He was also an avid reader of writers Hunter S. Thompson, Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski. (Not to mention the poetry of Baudelaire and the piano’s-been-drinking lyrics of Tom Waits.)

Siegel, looking back to the 1960s and 1970s, describes Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and John McPhee as his ‘textbooks’. Essayist and journalist Pico Iyer cites writers such as Graham Greene, V. S. Naipaul and W. G. Sebald, but also notes that his close study of the strictly fact-checked model of *Time* magazine gave him a crash course in concision, clarity and ‘telling a story through details and particulars’.

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The same advice can be heard across the spectrum. Susan Sontag, writing about writing for the *New York Times*, observed that 'the impulse to write is almost always fired by reading. Reading, the love of reading is what makes you dream of becoming a writer.' And bestselling author Stephen King, whose book *On Writing* offers useful tips for both fiction and non-fiction writers, says he first began to learn the lesson that 'good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing' by reading Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Ross McDonald. But 'I gained perhaps even more respect for the power of compact descriptive language from reading T. S. Eliot (those ragged claws scuttling across the ocean floor; those coffee spoons) and William Carlos Williams (white chickens, red wheelbarrow, the plums that were in the ice box, so sweet and so cold)'.

Looking across so many stories, we were by no means attempting a best of the best. As journalists who teach both writing and journalism at university we know the value of guest lectures where published writers come in and talk to the students about their craft. We hope that, in part, our book serves as a forum where the voices of some eminent 'guests' and their invaluable advice will be accessible along with their stories. As to the selection of stories, the longer we looked the more we realised how much the various non-fiction categories overlap, as beloved as they may be by those whose expertise depends on policing their margins. We wanted to explore a continuum where fine writing skills come together in the art of storytelling, whether the telling stories that result come from the urgent narrative of history-in-a-hurry in news writing, or the more ruminative meditations of essays and memoir.

It seemed obvious that the same sorts of skills translate across the categories. When reporters chase down the news, both deftly telegraphed events and artful writing can be in evidence. Good journalists, like good fiction writers, can frame a dramatic story – even re-create it scene by scene if they're blessed with the space – people it with characters, record their thoughts and feelings, layer in backgrounding context and sound resonating echoes of other, past stories. (Important stories, as the late Graham Perkin, editor of the *Melbourne Age*, memorably observed, have roots in the past and a stake in the future.)

If a non-fiction writer produces a densely researched story that focuses on ideas as much as events, the reader is unlikely to care if it is tap-dancing between feature story and essay. Likewise journalists and essayists can take on hot political topics, and both can pull back from the narrative for a lyrical meditation on the details that make place and time resonate for the reader. Nor is opinion necessarily the exclusive preserve of the essay or column writer. A piece of feature writing fuelled by meticulous research that flags its intention to take a stand – as clearly as it does its sources – doesn't shed its cred because some commentators cling doggedly to the bogus notion that objectivity is an outcome that can actually be attained,



rather than a useful reminder to aim, always, for balance. The same blurring of the lines can be seen with essays, memoir and travel. Should the travel writers who spin rich yarns interwoven with history and cultural conjecture be pigeonholed with some of the advertorial writing that bulks out the travel sections? If essayists veer into their own history – or the world's – are they operating in the land of memoir (and are memoirs, as Clive James suggests, unreliable)?

Who is to say where journalism ends and writing begins? Or when writing ascends into the rarefied realms of literature? For us, fine storytelling is the key to fine writing. And people are always to the fore. And that's what we looked for. Most of the writers included here engage in both journalism and other sorts of non-fiction. Their pieces show us writers breaking conventions, telling untold stories, writing artfully, honestly, amusingly, about their own predilections, pitching us into other people's lives, offering us insights into our own. Some set out to expose spin, some, fired up by the watchdog notion of public interest, take a fierce stand against the powerful, pushing to provide a voice for the powerless.

We see them responding to all sorts of challenges. How do you get at the truth behind the Tampa headlines? How do you force a big company to admit to endangering the health of its workers? What do you do when you suspect a famous book is a fake? How does it feel to be on the receiving end of police crowd control? Or on a hillside, like Annie Dillard, spellbound and fearful, watching the light being sucked from the sky during an eclipse? What makes ordinary people commit murder? And what, as a hungry David Sedaris wants to know, makes fancy restaurants think a huge plate with a tarted-up tidbit in the middle will pass for a good feed?

Non-fiction stories, like fiction stories, stand or fall – as they always have – on whether or not they are a good read, whether they grip us, inspire us, surprise us, inform us, fire up our imaginations (or our hackles), or home in with so much heart on human frailties or foibles that they move us to laughter or tears. Read, enjoy, reflect, have a go yourself. But above all, read.

**With thanks**

There are many people who have helped us with advice and assistance during this project, in particular: Philip Bell, Aileen Berry, Peter Craven, Jenny Cullen, Mitchell Dean, Carol Elliott, Mandy van den Elshout, Helen Freidman, Damian Grace, Ashley Hay, Robyn and John Paul Healy, Pico Iyer, Alexandra Jones, Christine Jones, Debra Jopson, Noel King, Caro Llewellyn, David McKnight, Kathryn Millard, Mark Mordue, Penny O'Donnell, Susan Omundsen, John Potts, Tony Stephens, Michael Visontay, Julia Wee, Amanda Wilson and Susan Wyndham.

Our families and friends provided care and encouragement that kept us going and the team at Cambridge helped to smooth our way.

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Finally, the authors compiled the featured interviews together and we are grateful to the writers for their patience with our questioning. We thank all the writers of these stories who have so generously allowed us to reproduce their work. It is their skill, their dedication and their love of storytelling that we honour in this book and share with our readers.