

## *Ten Spurs Intro*

### **The Problem With Writing**

by Michael J. Mooney

There's a dog barking in the distance. I can hear the neighborhood kids playing outside, enjoying a temperate summer evening, an anomaly in North Texas. I want to talk to my fiancée. Or go for a walk. Or play with the dog. I'm tempted to check Facebook, Twitter, email, text messages, the scores of four or five different games. There are so many great stories to read. Part of me wants to wade mindlessly through the Internet, to get lost in a labyrinth of Wikipedia pages and YouTube videos, to learn things I know I'll forget by tomorrow. I don't want to write.

I'm greasy and tired and my eyes feel dry from staring at the screen. I've been working on this for too long, sweating, worrying, running sentences over in my head. I've typed up thousands of words I don't like, deleted lede after lede after lede. I've read parts aloud, scribbled different outlines in notebooks, talked it out a few times with a few different people.

But here I am. Still sitting in front of the keyboard, still hoping the draft I've got open will turn into ... *something*. I'm not even sure who might end up reading this. But I want to tell the story the right way, to get across the right points. This is it though. The point is the sitting still, trying to block out the sounds, the world. Trying to focus, to conjure, to sculpt out of the marble of our minds some new thought about the world. It's sweating, it's feeling anxious and curious and joyous and painful—physical pain, in your back and elbows and eyelids. It's hoping you'll send something out into the world that might outlive you—and trying not to think about any of that. It's about the story. It's always about the story.

Maybe a month ago, my good friend George Getschow asked me to write an introduction to this year's *Ten Spurs* anthology, the annual journal published by the Mayborn School of Journalism at the University of North Texas, where I went to grad school. George said he wanted me to write about—these are his words—“becoming a literary journalist.”

To be honest, that idea makes me uncomfortable. I'm not sure exactly what that means. What, exactly, makes some journalism “literary” and other journalism less so is a matter of personal taste. What I do is tell stories. I try to make them read like the stories I like to read, the ones that captivate me, motivate me. The stories that make me think about life in a different way. So, in lieu of George's request, I can tell the story about how I started in journalism.

It's tricky though, writing about writing. I want it to sound as romantic as I thought it was when I was young—and sometimes it is. Through the stories I've worked on, I've been lucky enough to go to all sorts of interesting places and meet all sorts of interesting people, and I get to work with some of the coolest, most astute editors in the business. But writing can be terrifying, too. There are deadlines, of course. But the real stress comes from the worrying. You don't want to make a mistake, not with someone's story, not with a single word choice. You don't want to miss an opportunity, a chance to poke a hole in the bubble people put themselves in, a chance to touch

someone's heart. You don't want to let down an editor. You really don't want to let down a reader.

So as I'm sitting here, I want to write about the summer of 2005, about fifteen or so strangers showing up one at a time at an old hotel in a small Texas town. It was a Sunday in early July, so hot it hurt. This was my first class in grad school, a three-week course about immersion journalism taught by George, at the Spur Hotel in Archer City—the hometown of Larry McMurtry, the inspiration for much of his work, the place where he decided to plant his massive antiquarian bookstore—about two and a half hours west of Dallas.

I was excited but nervous. I had almost no journalism experience, and I knew nobody in the class—or in the entire industry, really. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I wanted to at least try to write stories like the ones I read in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Texas Monthly*, articles that seemed to take some of the classic storytelling elements from fiction and apply them to real-life, true tales I found myself rereading and talking about anytime I got the chance.

The first person I met when I got to the hotel was Brantley Hargrove. He was tall and blond, wearing shades and a Grateful Dead shirt. I remember thinking that his name seemed much more writer-ly than mine, that the name “Brantley Hargrove” just seemed destined to end up on the spine of some epic Western. The group was an interesting mix of people with ages ranging from early 20s to late 50s. There were lifelong journalists, MFA students trying something new and a few photographers who couldn't resist the chance to escape the hassles of life for three weeks. We all checked into the hotel, introduced ourselves and made small talk. A few of us had a couple drinks. The last person to arrive that night was a tall man about my age, wearing cowboy boots and carrying an old IBM electric typewriter. His name was Paul Knight—another writer-ly sounding name, I thought.

On the first morning of the class, George showed up with hundreds of books, examples of this “narrative journalism,” this “creative nonfiction” we would be discussing. He stacked them on the tables in the hotel dining room, under a chandelier made of deer antlers. There was Wolfe and Talese and Thompson and Capote and Didion. Krakauer, Orlean, Lewis, Larson, Remnick, Roach. History, memoir, crime, sports, business, writing about writing. Anthologies from newspapers, magazines, writers who've been popping out great stories for decades. This, George explained by way of encouragement, was the kind of writing we would be attempting while we were here. We'd read a lot, deconstruct a bit, practice with some short passages. Then: off we'd go to find stories.

It took a couple of days, some odd questions, some digging at the library, some riding around with ranchers, some hanging out at the only bar in town—but eventually most of the people in the class did find subjects that seemed worthy of deeper inspection. One woman wanted to write about the old jail, with its ledgers full of handwritten history, a hanging station built in 1910, and the jaw bones of a young Indian woman kept in a jar of formaldehyde. Someone else wanted to write about the elaborate grotto just outside of town and the people who drive from hundreds of miles away to pray at the feet of the Virgin Mary statue there. Brantley found an old rancher-historian and a battleground where Texas Rangers had taken on some of the local tribes—events

that directly inspired parts of *Lonesome Dove*. Paul found an old roughneck who wore the years of oilfield work from his wrinkled face to his withered hands.

I decided I'd write about what the locals all called "backroading" and the town's mayor, who, every night after the bar closed, would load his pickup with coolers full of ice and beer and just cruise the moonlit backroads with his buddies, listening to country music and talking about life. Night after night, as they'd take off for the backroads as a small caravan, I'd tag along, riding with whomever invited me. We'd fishtail out of the gravel parking lots then roll through the crisp country darkness at 15 miles per hour with the lights off. There was drinking, singing, laughing, even some crying. It was a subculture full of fascinating, (mostly) loveable characters.

I typed up notes every night. I talked about the story a lot—sometimes even with the men I planned to write about. There seemed to be so many possibilities, so many places to start, so many directions I could go. But then it was time to write. And writing is almost never as much fun as reporting.

If you ask George, he's liable to tell you I was a terrible writer before I got to him. In fact, I sometimes joke that before I met George that summer, I was just a young Bolivian boy who spoke no English at all. The truth is: I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. I didn't mention it much because being a professional writer of any kind seemed unrealistic, like when you hear a kid talk about wanting to be an actor or an astronaut. But even before I could read or write, I would make books with my mother out of construction paper. I was 4 or 5. I'd dictate a story, and she'd record it in her beautiful penmanship, then I'd illustrate each page. Most of the books were about ninjas, pirates or cows. I also wrote short stories in school, and plenty of essays and research papers. (Once in a while, for a modest amount of cash, I may have even helped a fellow student or two with an occasional assignment.) I took creative writing classes in college. (My dual undergrad degree, from the University of Texas, is in English and anthropology.) There's probably not anything I'd want anyone to read now, but my point is: I'd done *some* writing before going to Archer City.

But yes, that first draft—those first couple drafts—of the backroading story were pretty terrible. I wanted to be literary. I wanted to be gritty and sweeping. Mostly the writing was purple and awkward. At one point I had an entire page about a sunrise. Some pretty words—signifying nothing. It wasn't working.

Then George did something I'd never seen. We met to talk about the many spots where my story went wrong, and he rewrote the first few paragraphs. They were the same words—my words—but it was different. It was direct. It was clear, free of gimmicks. It was...just the story. During the same meeting, George gave me a copy of a Skip Hollandsworth story from *Texas Monthly* called "The Last Ride of Cowboy Bob." It was an incredible account of a mild-mannered woman who robbed banks dressed as a portly bearded man, completely fooling authorities for years. I'd read and admired that magazine for a long time, but suddenly I noticed how fast the prose read, how there was nothing that drew unnecessary attention to the writer, how the story unfolded naturally. The emotion seemed to come from the spaces between the words.

I rewrote my story for a fifth (maybe sixth) time, but this time I tried to step out of the way as much as possible. I tried to focus on the stories of these men, their troubles, their solutions and the new troubles those solutions brought. (As I write this, the irony of writing about myself not writing about myself is not lost on me.) I quoted from Larry McMurtry more than once, because in many ways these men were re-enacting scenes from McMurtry's own fiction—or re-enacting events that inspired that fiction in the first place. (Likely it was a combination of both.) I wanted readers to feel what it was like in that truck, cruising next to the barbed wire fences and meadows, to understand a little bit about the lives that send people to those backroads at night.

The story was published in the first Mayborn literary journal, *Spurs of Inspiration*. The idea and name came from a conversation on the porch on the last night of the Archer City class. The men I'd written about got copies and read the story. Some were upset at first—the mayor got a bit of flak for driving drunk, but probably less than you'd think—but they all wanted to shake my hand, too. They seemed to respect that I, in one man's words, "told it like it is." I still go back there sometimes, and I still see those men. Some have read it so many times they can quote certain passages of the story back to me. That's a strange, complicated feeling. It made me think about life, about lives, about the power stories have.

See, everything we know in life is in the form of a story. Any memory you have, you have it in the context of a story: where you were, what you were doing, who you were with. But a mere story can never be as powerful as a memory. And there is no time where that is more abundantly clear than when you sit down to type it up. When you retire to some sort of cave, and it's just you and your notes and recordings and memories. You want to make something that moves someone as much as you were moved, and you know you never will.

This is the problem I have writing about Archer City. I know I'll never convey that strange alchemy there, with us and the town and the bookstores and the people. With the words, the hopes, the ambition. No matter how hard I try, I can't give you the feeling I have in my chest when I think about that time.

Of course, most of graduate school wasn't like that. Classes were interesting and stimulating, and I like almost everyone I met there, but I noticed quickly the difference between academic classes and what we had in Archer City.

There's a lot of debate over whether journalism, as a craft, can be taught. Right now, in most schools, it's edified the way we do with most liberal arts. There's history, standard practices, the canon. I'd say a lot of that best prepares someone to be a journalism teacher. (As most English degrees best prepare you to teach English.) But journalism can be taught the way music can be taught. You can teach someone chords, you can let them listen and deconstruct the greatest songs of all time, but at the end of the day, someone either has a tune inside of them, or they don't. You can't teach curiosity or creativity, but you can inspire it.

To that end, in Spring 2006, I was going to New York to visit relatives when George arranged for me to visit what his former colleagues referred to as "his old stomping grounds" at *The Wall Street Journal*. In his time at the *Journal*, George was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize (in 1984), and he was the youngest bureau chief in the paper's history (which, to my knowledge, is still

true). I got to tour the offices, to meet several reporters and editors, and to have a few beers with veteran writer Ken Wells in the bar downstairs. (Ken is the author of *Travels with Barley*, an entire book about drinking beer, so it was quite an honor.) He told me stories about his Cajun grandfather, Catfish Wells, the master storyteller.

The next summer, George had a second class in Archer City, and I found a way to go back. So did Paul and Brantley. One of my fellow students that second time in Archer City was a quick-witted, petite blond woman named Tara Nieuwesteeg. Tara is now a book editor, nightlife columnist and my fiancée. She reads just about everything I write—these words being no exception—before I turn it in. (She’s awesome.)

That second year, I also got to meet Gay Talese at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, which happens right before the Archer City class. I was supposed to be a sort of graduate school liaison, there to escort him around the hotel and help him with anything he needed. He was extremely generous with his time, inviting me to ask him about anything he’d written. We talked about his first collection of stories (which has since been repackaged and renamed), called *The Overreachers*. We talked about why he injected himself into his famous Sinatra story (he said it was the only way he “could make that scene work”), and why he wrote about himself in the third person in his DiMaggio story (same reason). On the Saturday of the conference, I had lunch with him and Skip Hollandsworth. I can still remember sitting there, listening to them talk about writing, about writers they’d always admired and writers they didn’t. I remember Talese talking about Hunter S. Thompson’s legendary Kentucky Derby story. Animated, he said something to the effect of, “the only true thing in that story is that there was a horse race.”

I’d read in an interview that Talese took notes on cut up pieces of shirt board. At one point, I asked him about it—I wasn’t even sure what a “shirt board” was. He smiled and opened the jacket of his tailored suit. He pulled out a stack of five or six oval-shaped pieces of cardboard. He explained that he cut them himself and rounded the edges so they wouldn’t show outside the jacket. The top one had a “1” on it, the next one a “2” and so on. On the first card, he had written down a few names he wanted to remember. (Mine was not on the list.) Then he handed me the second card and told me I could keep it if I wanted to. And I did. (I still use it as a bookmark.)

At the same conference, I entered the new writing contest, the same annual contest that produced the 10 stories in this anthology. My story was about a rundown strip club in Fort Worth and the strange characters who inhabited it. Some were crass, some were shrewd, some were surprisingly—disturbingly—sweet. Again, there was the sitting and thinking. The rewriting. The rewriting again. I wanted readers to feel something, even if I wasn’t sure what. I wanted them to see what they’d never see otherwise, to go into the margins of society and come out knowing something more about life. I tried to tell their stories through a series of short vignettes. When the story took second place in the reported narrative category, I got a check for \$2,000. It felt like so much money—for writing something. I remember holding that check, photographing it. I remember buying drinks for Paul and Brantley that night—and a scotch for Gay Talese. I remember the scent of Tara’s hair when she hugged me. I remember thinking that this life, this being a professional writer, might actually be possible.

By 2007, Paul was working at a newspaper in Alabama. Brantley was working at a newspaper in Wyoming. I was working as an enterprise writer at *The Dallas Morning News*, where I got to work with an entire team of incredible journalists and a very understanding editor. I got to write front-page stories about soldiers and Klingon enthusiasts and middle-aged skateboarders and a church of young, fiery Christians with tattoos and Mohawks. Despite our distance though, Paul, Brantley and I would share our stories over email. Sometimes before publication, sometimes after. We'd give honest feedback, what worked and what didn't, even when we weren't sure exactly why. *Have you tried this? Have you read that?* We talked about which stories we'd like to do and which stories and books we were reading. We talked about wanting to write magazine stories, which were mostly longer, with more time to write and report.

In September of that year I took a job at *New Times*, an alt-weekly in Fort Lauderdale. The same week, Paul started a job with the same company, at the alt-weekly in Houston. And a few months later, Brantley got a fellowship at my paper in Florida. He sat at the desk next to mine. Tara got a job at a book publisher in Boca Raton and started writing the nightlife column at *New Times*. We'd all go to the beach and drink beer and talk about stories. Even when Brantley eventually moved to Nashville and Paul moved to Austin, we'd still talk regularly. When one of us had some big accomplishment—when I had a story selected for Best American Crime Reporting, for example—we would all set aside some time in the evening for a conference call. We'd get George on the phone, too, and he'd gush over us with proud, occasionally rambling, toasts.

A few years ago, Tara and I moved back to Dallas, and I joined the staff of *D Magazine*. I also write for *GQ* and for a few national websites dedicated to longform journalism. (SB Nation, Grantland and BuzzFeed are among a group of sites leading a sort of renaissance of storytelling right now, aided by aggregating sites like Gangrey, Byliner, Longreads and Longform.) Brantley moved to Dallas, too. He works for the *Dallas Observer*, where he writes incredible stories about the crime and corruption in Texas. Paul is now an assistant editor at *Texas Monthly*.

Recently, George invited all of us to his house. I had just published an eBook with Little, Brown and Company, the same publisher as Malcolm Gladwell, David Foster Wallace, J.D. Salinger, and writer-cum-billionaire J.K. Rowling. Paul had just signed a book deal with Penguin, another giant in the publishing industry. Brantley had just finished a remarkable story about the terrifying murders of two district attorneys in North Texas. And Tara had just agreed to write a regular bar column in *D*.

We got to George's house, on a lake in the suburbs, just as the sun was going down. We drank bourbon and smoked cigars and looked out over the water. We talked about old times, about that first class in Archer City, about trying to soak in an experience and then pour it out onto the page. Last year, Larry McMurtry auctioned off most of his collection and shuttered 75 percent of the store. The Spur Hotel is for sale, and George doesn't know how many more classes he'll have out there. The later it got, the more emotional George got, listing all of our accomplishments, reminding us how proud he was. It wasn't just the alcohol or the beautiful setting. It was that complicated feeling of nostalgia, that sense of accomplishment mixed with a longing for what was. It was the kind of moment you'd want to record, the kind of experience you'd want to share with others. But it doesn't seem possible. I know the story on the page could never match the feelings of the moment.

So here I am, still trying, still typing. The dogs are all quiet now. The neighborhood kids are inside, asleep. Any plans I might have had for the night are long gone. And I'm reminding myself that this is what it's about. It's being exhausted, missing social obligations, skipping meals. I know that, in theory, the process of creation doesn't have to be painful. And it's not always painful. Reporting is the adventure, whether it's sifting through documents or sitting through a trial or hanging out with extraordinary, fascinating people. Then you have to process it. You have to think. You have to worry. You have to change your mind—and change your mind about changing your mind. You have to bleed, then maybe throw it away.

When it works, it's almost like a trance. Other thoughts, other sounds disappear. You think in Story. If the circumstances are right, you produce, like the soil produces vegetables or a chicken produces an egg. You push, you spill. Nothing becomes ... something. Then more. Then more. It's molting. Or birthing. No matter what the emotion is, if it's worth writing about, you feel something. If it's good enough, you feel all sorts of things. You try to record, for yourself, for others, for history. You can only type and delete and type again.

Then you have to stop. You have to put it out there, whether "there" is *GQ* or an alt-weekly or the Mayborn writing contest. And you hope. Hope might be the most important part of writing that nobody talks about. No matter what you write, you're hoping. You hope someone understands. You hope someone feels what you felt, what your subjects felt. You hope you make your friends and loved ones proud. You hope you help, because that's all you can do.