Reporter FORUM

An Interview with Jon Franklin

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Q. What is your advice on structuring a story while reporting?

A. You report for structure the same way you report for anything else. When you're reporting for dramatic narrative, you're reporting for character, meaning and structure at the same time.

Q. What should one look for then?

A. We as humans live stories. What you do -- and this talks a lot easier than it lives, of course -- is look for the stories that the character is living, and pick one. Being able to see stories in life, that's part of the reporting. A lot of reporters find this very difficult because they confuse meaning with opinion, but they are not the same thing at all. Meanings are the facts that come out of the story.

Q. A reporter should look for the meaning of a story?

A. The story has a lot of aspects. It has character, meaning, plot. As a reporter, when you find any one of these you can connect the dots and find all the others. Often one bit of trouble the reporter will get into is that we're all living multiple stories at once. So they try to report the hottest parts of four stories, but you can't do that. You have to pick one. If you don't it'll be a bloody mess. You see a lot of that problem. People try to do the top of three or four stories.

Q. Can you explain that?

A. Take me. I'm a reporter, a human being, a father. I take care of repairing my home. I'm a driver. These are all different aspects of my life. If you were to interview me and decided you wanted to take a little bit from everything, you probably are going to end up with a jumble. Say you were telling a story about a very impatient person. You can tell that through how he drives, of course, but you have to focus on one story, one aspect of a character's life. I'm not saying you can't cross those lines, but you can only tell one story.

Q. In your book you focus a lot on the action in things. Why is that?

A. One of the most curious things about modern journalism is that you have to ask that question at all. Journalism has become so based on quotes. But in life, you don't just count what people say. When you watch someone, their words aren't nearly as important as their actions. It's almost a cliche: action is more important than words. So when we say that we want to tell a story about how people live, we mean that we want to tell a story about how people act and react. I hardly ever use quotes. I use dialogue, but that's different. The reader is no dummy. When the reporter stands there with his notebook and asks the subject a question and then quotes him, that quote is the answer to the reporter. In this way the reporter is entering the story. The reader knows these things. Even if the reporter isn't talking about himself, he is in the story because the quote is an answer to a question being asked by someone. Dialogue is an interaction between two people in your story.

Q. So by asking questions you stop the natural action of a story?

A. Yes. What a good narrative journalist will do is sit down and ask people, "well, what did you do and what happened then and what happened then, what did they do and what did you do in response to that."

Q. In reporting you also focus on picking the right main character for the story. Could you talk to me a little about that? How do you find the right character?

A. Writers tend to be either story-based or character-based. They find the story and then the character or the other way around. I tend to find the story first and then hope it tells me who is going to be the main character. Quite frequently, the character who I think is going be the main character ends up not being the main character. In "Mrs. Kelly's Monster" I was sure she was the main character, but in the end she wasn't.

Q. Why wasn't she as good a main character as the doctor was?

A. The reason I thought she was going to be the main character was because I thought she was such a courageous woman. But since the story turned out to be totally about the operation, she wasn't even there. And the story ended up being about what it is like to be a surgeon who just killed somebody.

Q. So the reporter has to say, "I thought this was going to be my main character but I have to change my mind?"

A. Yeah, and not just about character but about a lot of things. What seems to be the biggest problem for reporters is that they really don't like uncertainty. I find that almost all stories are not what I wished they were or thought they were. I find it necessary to go in with a hypothesis. It is a very scientific process. You have an idea you start out with because if you don't have an idea you can't shape anything, but then you have to be able to let go of that idea. And that is very difficult because of the uncertainty involved. What if this idea doesn't work? Etc. You have to let go of your hypothesis to get to the other idea, so there is a moment when you don't have anything. It involves a great deal of insecurity. I feel that myself, and I've been doing this for a long time.

Q. What is your advice to reporters who are done reporting and sit down and begin structuring their story? What should they do?

A. Forget every bit of journalism they learned. And it is not that the journalism is invalid. It is valid. Journalism, especially daily journalism, is always based on making decisions on too little information. So we invoke the rule of thumb, which we have to have. But because of the insecurities involved we turn the rules of thumb into laws, articles of faith. These rules of thumb are perfectly good but they're not laws. When you change things as dramatically as you do when you're going to write a narrative, the definition of news you have been taught is not useful. Another obvious difference is that people learn to write leads first, but in narrative you write endings first. I think 90 per cent of people who try to write a narrative don't get anywhere because they try to write the lead first, and that's not the way a narrative works.

Q. What should they do instead?

A. You do your reporting, but it's a different reporting. You don't focus on quotes, you focus on actions. When you sit down to do your structure, you try to find your story. You're looking for human beings instead of news value, and your story is an experience. The reason we read stories is because we have evolved a wish to understand the world around us. The way we do that best is through our own experiences, but if we read a good story it's like living another person's life without taking the risk or the time. To live a story may take two years, but to read it takes maybe fifteen minutes. So you look for stories.

Q. In structuring the story you advocate the complication-resolution model. What makes that model so powerful?

A. It's really the only model there is. It's the form that was used by Homer, that Aristotle talked about. It was defined the way that I use it by Chekhov more than a hundred years ago. The reason it is so powerful is that we are programmed that way. Anthropologists have documented that it is the way we understand stories best. It's the rule underlying all story, just as there are 30 to 40 rules underlying all languages. There is nothing arbitrary about it. It's the way we live our lives. It follows the rhythm of life. You could probably, off the top of your head, name 10 or 15 stories that you are participating in at the moment.

Q. If you were to pick three important elements of a good story structure what would they be?

A. I think you can't do that. It's sort of like if you have a baby and someone asks you to pick three parts you want to keep. A story has to have all its moving parts for it to function. But the basic moving part is the character. The character confronts something, struggles with it, usually realizes something and then brings it to a conclusion. I try to tell people that stories are all alike the way snowflakes are all alike, and all different in the way snowflakes are all different.

Q. So focusing on the character and what he does is a good way to build a story structure?

A. It has to be, ultimately, because the reader has to have a character to identify with in order to suspend disbelief. Without a character you don't have a story. Now and then I get reporters who say, "I want to write a story about an institution." Well, no. We cannot identify with that institution. Not that you can't write about an institution, but nobody is going to read it. If you want to write about an institution and show how it works, then do a day with some person in that institution. Then we'll know about both the person and the institution. What happens with journalists is that, because of the way we're trained, we often confuse the play with the scenery. The institution is the scenery. I am a science writer, but I don't write about science. I write about people. The science is just the scenery.

Q. Before writing you focus a lot on outlining the story. What's important about outlining?

A. Stories are complicated, and they're even more complicated when you don't make them up. When you take them out of real life, you have to externalize them. You have to have some kind of notation. Why do mathematicians write on blackboards? Because the can't do it in their heads. I don't think very many journalists can do it in their heads, either. I'm learning to do a lot more in my head now compared to years ago. You do learn. But for beginners it's total nonsense not to outline. It's like flying an airplane without filing a flight plan. Somehow people have the idea that outlining takes the art out of it, but it doesn't. That's where you put the art into the story.

Q. What advice would you give to beginners regarding how to build a good story outline?

A. The outline is just a way of understanding the story you are reporting on. You sit there thinking about your outline, but you're really thinking about your story. I have people who get very tangled up in the outlining process. I did for a while, too. But the outline is just a notation of your story. You could write it and then see if you can make sense of it, but that's pretty damn time-consuming, especially if you have to go through a lot of versions. So it's a way of looking at your story and saying, "does it meet all the rules it has to meet?"

Q. How do you do it practically? Do you use index cards?

A. There is a big difference between doing an outline and arranging your notes. I have used index cards. I've used butcher paper. It's a constant struggle in which you try to make sense of your story and visualize it. What that comes down to is the outline. You have to do it in five lines because the story has to have five parts. If you can't say what those parts are then you don't know your story, and there is no point moving beyond that outline. What'll happen is that people will try to find the story by writing, but that's a very slow way of performing suicide.

Q. The story model you teach has five parts: the complication, first developmental focus, second developmental focus, third developmental focus, and resolution. Can you talk to me a little about this model?

A. Each segment has a beginning, middle and end. What's good at the end of the complication is not what's good at the end of the second developmental focus. Classically you have your character living his life, running into this problem, and sort of getting stuck with it. Either he can't get away from it or can't let it get away from him. He ends up locked in sort of mortal combat with this situation. He struggles with it, has an idea how to do it, but fails. And that is your first developmental focus, the failure. Of course there are exceptions to this: all snowflakes are different. But snowflakes always have six sides, and stories always have five parts. The middle developmental focus tends to be one in which the character is struggling with confusion. He has all of the elements he needs, but he doesn't know what to make of it. Something called movement is occurring: in the third developmental focus he and the reader will get the inspiration and insight, the vision, for how he is going to bring it to an end. After that there is the resolution.

Those are the five parts, and they write differently. Most people find that the last thing that will work in a story are the second and third developmental focus. Those are the parts where all kinds of garbage gets shoved in as you are doing the other stuff. So you'll often end up with a very good story except for the third developmental, which is badly organized.

Q. How do you recognize a story plot and use it correctly?

A. When you recognize it you don't have a problem using it correctly, because it should be the organizing principle of the story. You'll love it because it will be your guide.

Q. So what are your thoughts on chronology in a story? Does everything always have to move forward?

A. It does in life, doesn't it. The only difference in art is that you can have a flashback. Stories usually only have one. It comes in a very typical place somewhere in the middle of the

complication focus or in the very beginning of the first developmental focus, to explain why and how the character got to where he got. But you can also let the flashback occur in the complication and then not go back to present time before the resolution, so that you have the developmental focus in a flashback.

Q. Aside from losing the reader, what is your biggest concern while shaping the story?

A. You have to look at different points and ask, "did I do them correctly?" Do you have movement, identification with the character, do you have your five threads. I mean, constructing a story is like lining up dominos and knocking them over. If lining them up is what writing is, and knocking them down is what reading is, then lining them up is a long tedious process. If you get one of them out of place it won't work.

Q. From a structural point of view, what are you looking for in the lead of a story?

A. These kind of stories don't have leads, they have hooks. They are the easiest thing to write, because they are the last things you write. And if you do everything else right, I guarantee you, you will not have trouble with your lead.

Q. So you start by writing the end and then move backwards.

A. It depends on who you are, what your story is about and how well you understand it. Sometimes I'll start at the beginning of a story, but I won't pay any attention to it, because I know I'm going to come back and change it. My preferred way to start is right in the middle of the action, but I don't always do that.

Q. Beginning, middle and end is a classic model in fiction writing. Why is it that it works so well in narrative journalism?

A. Because that is the way we live.

Q. What are your thoughts on rhythm in a text?

A. That's a very complicated question. Rhythm is a very complicated thing. It's critical, it's always present, and if you screw it up, you'll lose the reader. There are rhythms that are right on the surface, like sentences, and there are deep rhythms -- the way a character thinks and lives.

Q. What makes a good cliff-hanger?

A. If you've got movement and your story is based on action, cliff-hangers are easy. The reader wants to come to closure, but at the point where the tension is, the writer just stops. You just stop somewhere that's not really a stopping place.

Q. Another problem is that it's easy to lose readers with background information and technical information. Where do you put that into your story?

A. You have to show it in the context of the story. In a couple of places in a story you can step aside and explain something, but mostly one presents it in the story. Frankly, the way most people do it doesn't work. The old classic where you explain something and the reader is supposed to know it -- well, the reader doesn't know it three paragraphs later. It's just white

noise. You have to see it as scenery. You can't put it in there unless it's part of the story, and that means part of the action. So if the character knows it or learns it, you put it in there. That is often why you have your flashback. You bring him up through his learning process, so that the reader can look at his problem the same way that he looks at it.

I did a story once about a young biologist who, to get his PhD, had to make a mouse, genetically. The obvious complication was that he had to make a mouse to get his PhD, but the story complication was that the damn recipe wasn't working and he wasn't getting his mouse. So I had to take him back through all these things he had to learn to make a mouse. The story was him learning how to make a mouse and now it wouldn't work. This is where you get to the first developmental focus, where he tries and fails. So you don't do background, you do story. If you do background you are going to lose your story. Now that doesn't mean that you can't step aside for a short period, but if you are talking about something really complex, you can't take a stroll.

Q. How does planning a serial narrative differ from planning a one-piece narrative?

A. I don't think there's really any difference, except that you emphasize the structure even more. Ideally there would always be five parts. You really can't get the full power out of a narrative unless it has five parts because you have to do at least one part on each focus. It just seems disproportionate if you do less. I have done it with fewer, but it is just not ideal.

Q. What kind of narrative would you advise beginners to start out with -- the perspective or the retrospective?

A. I think that people should start out with a "day with," because you are right there and it's fairly simple. Don't try to do something that has news value, because you get all screwed up. But before people do that they ought to learn how to tell stories and the best ways to do that is in anecdotes. You can put anecdotes in hard news stories. So start out small and put anecdote into your daily news stories. I got started by writing more and more anecdotes into my news stories. After a while all I did was anecdotes.