

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to the Features Department

The world of feature writing is a fertile one. Today daily newspapers, alternative papers and magazines of all genres need good feature writers. And there is a tremendous crossover of talent among the various types of publications. I started my own career at a give-away weekly, went to a paid circulation weekly, then to a daily newspaper feature section, then became editor of a Sunday magazine and now am editor of *Minnesota Monthly*, a regional magazine outside the world of newspapers. I got the job at the Sunday magazine after the editor there left for *National Geographic*, and one of the former editors at *Minnesota Monthly* is now an editor in a newspaper feature section. The freelance writers who write for *Minnesota Monthly* often have their articles published in daily newspapers, alternative weeklies and other monthly magazines. Skills they learn writing for one medium can easily be transferred to another. Indeed, many of the best magazine writers began in newspapers and some have even made the leap to books. I started at the bottom and worked my way up. So can you. Or you may be one of the fast-track wunderkinds, but either way, the trip getting into feature writing is hard work but great fun.

What Is Feature Writing?

Leonard Witt

Richard Cheverton, an editor at *The Orange County Register* in Santa Ana, California, is one of the nation's most respected authorities on

feature writing, but not long ago he wrote, "Who the hell really understands what a feature is? I've worked for over a decade as a feature editor, and I'm not sure I could define the word 'feature' for a freshman journalism class. You can nail down a news, or sports, or business story—but grabbing the essence of a feature is like wrestling a squid; it'll soon depart in a cloud of ink. Good editors just know. Don't ask me how. They just do."

So, too, do good feature writers. They see and feel a feature when other writers around them might be focusing on the breaking story, on what used to be called the "hard news."

When I edited a feature section, we ran stories like "Roller Coasting: The Absolute Delight of Coming Back Alive"; "Charles Atlas: Puny Weaklings Still Clamor to be Muscle Men"; "Brooklynese? Hey! Dey Don't Tawk Funny"; "Airwave Psychology: Concern Growing Over Radio, TV Advice Shows." In addition to these were advice columns, theater reviews and shorts about television.

In the Sunday magazine we did stories about the risks doctors have of contracting AIDS, about a married woman who gave up her baby for adoption, and about the quirky requests celebrities make when they come to Minneapolis and St. Paul hotels.

At *Minnesota Monthly* I asked a freelancer to write a story entitled "Early Motherhood, Later Motherhood," about two friends in their forties, one with a 5-year-old daughter and the other with a 25-year-old daughter. Other stories at the *Monthly* include a profile of a museum director who is waking up a staid old institution, and another is an essay from an ex-farmgirl who laments the passing of a way of life.

The magazine does home design features, food features, book reviews and arts stories as well as entertainment listings.

The stories I've edited by freelancers and staff writers vary in length from a couple hundred words to several thousand words. The writers' styles are just as varied. The person who did the doctor and AIDS story would not be the best person to do the quirky celebrity hotel story. Her style is too serious; her strength is tenacity, research, building giant files, and then taking the time to write and rewrite to make it all read like a nonfiction novel.

The guy who wrote the celebrity story has a loose, funny style. He likes to get into a story immediately and then get it written quickly. If he used the techniques that were used in the AIDS story, his story would have lost its punch.

Just in those three publications alone—the newspaper feature section, the Sunday magazine and the regional monthly—there was writing work for just about anyone who could write well. All kinds of styles appeared. The home design story is going to be far different from the story about doctors and AIDS, which is, of course, going to be different from the one about quirky hotels.

And the stories in those three publications are going to be far different from the stories that appear in *Gourmet*, *Cosmopolitan* and the *New York Times*.

Each writer must decide on his or her interests and style and then begin to actively pursue editors who can provide the work. In the world of feature writing the topics are infinite and the outlets many. The key to success is hard work, fine writing, and the ability to learn and to grow in the craft.

For the most part, the people who succeed are the ones who do their research, do solid reporting, and care about their writing.

Is there one kind of feature writing that's better than another? The answer is no. However, after saying that, I should point out my personal prejudice. I love stories that read like nonfiction novels. Stories in which characters come alive. It is the most sophisticated form of nonfiction writing, but not necessarily the best nonfiction writing.

To understand the nonfiction novel approach, think of drawing a continuum from a quick-breaking newspaper story to a full-blown nonfiction novel such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. On this continuum, feature writing would begin somewhere in the middle and begin moving toward the nonfiction novel. And in fact, today, the best writing in newspaper feature sections and magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* is probably more closely akin to the nonfiction book than to the traditional breaking newspaper story.

So let's back up on that continuum and start with the breaking news story. Take, for example, a train-car collision in which a group of teenage girls is killed. (This, incidentally, is similar to a story done by a feature writer I used to work with.) The next-day story probably would start something like, "Four girls returning from buying their prom dresses were killed yesterday when their car was hit by a freight train." The story would give all the facts. It would tell where the crash occurred, the time, who was in the car, the name of the train engineer; it would have quotes from the family, from eyewitnesses, from officials.

Now on that continuum from news story to nonfiction book we

might have a writer—a good writer, a sensitive writer—do a Sunday piece on how the town is stunned or the story might in part re-create how the accident occurred.

Moving closer to the nonfiction book might be a rendition similar to Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

The writer would re-create the entire day through meticulous research, by intense interviewing, and by chronicling all the important details. He might start with the engineer waking. Kissing his wife. He might describe the house, bring in telling details about the engineer. Perhaps the engineer has a daughter of his own.

The writer would have him starting out on his train; the size and speed of the train and its limitations would come alive. The train would be moving toward the fateful moment at the crossing. The writer would come back to the girls. The writer would probably take us into one of their houses. Have the girls wake, make conversation, reveal details of their lives. The writer would bring the girls in the car and the engineer on a literal head-on collision.

The reader could not let go of this story and would remember it for months. The writer would take us to the crash itself with the train rounding the slightly blind corner. We would see the branches that partially obscured the road, we'd hear the music playing loudly in the car.

To do all of this and do it factually usually requires experience. To pull this off the feature writer will have to know all the techniques of reporting. He will have a ton of notes, official reports and observations to sift through and then will have to turn in a beautifully written story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The writer will have central characters that we get to know and care about. This is feature writing in its most advanced form.

Room for Many Writing Styles

However, literary journalism is only one type of feature writing. Turn back to the lifestyle or feature sections, thumb through several magazines, and you will see many other forms. You will find writers who specialize in fashion, food reviewing, quick interviews or in-depth profiles. And the best of these writers are no lesser talents than the feature writer who moves closer to the nonfiction book. Indeed, writers like food critic Mimi Sheraton, movie reviewers Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, and health writer Jane Brody, are among the superstars of newspaper writing. You'll find their work in the feature pages.

They know about writing, they know about reporting, and they know about their subjects. At the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Sunday magazine, Maralyn Lois Polak conducts an interview each week with a famous person. On the continuum from breaking story to nonfiction novel her work in the *Inquirer* would be in the middle, but as a writing talent she is near the top because what she does she does better than just about anyone else. And since this is a book about feature writing, that is important to remember. In the world of features there is room for many kinds of writers with many kinds of styles and with many aspirations. Some will want to be full-time staff writers at a newspaper or magazine, others would like to make their living by freelancing, and others might want to do the occasional article while holding a nonwriting job. As an editor I have published them all and will continue to do so to ensure my magazine is fresh and lively.

Top-notch feature stories demand top-notch writing, and the best writing comes from getting away from your desk. It means getting out where the stories are. Indeed, reporting is half the fun—and many times the only fun—because all too often the writing itself means pain. As an editor, I have worked with some truly fine writers, and I have watched them struggle over pieces and watched the color drain out of their faces, or sometimes watched their faces turn red with anger, as I had to tell them their stories weren't quite right. The story needs another rewrite. And then I watched as they struggled to get it perfect and then finally watched in amazement as raw copy was turned into a masterpiece. No one understands this process better than feature writer Christopher Scanlan who is about to take you into the life of a feature writer and show you the glories, joys, tears and struggles that make feature writing one of the world's best professions.

A Day in the Life of a Feature Writer

Christopher Scanlan

6:30 A.M.

In the Waters of Boca Ciega Bay,
Off Indian Rocks Beach, Florida

Ah, the feature writer's life. Spinning gossamer webs of prose. Rivaling the foreign correspondent for glamour. No daily deadlines, no stultifying late nights with the Zoning Board.

Oh yeah? So what am I doing huddled on the bone-hard seat of a 16-foot boat bouncing along the trampoline that is Boca Ciega Bay at dawn on a stormy April morning?

Reporting, that's what. "You can't write writing," Melvin Mencher used to drum into our heads at Columbia Journalism School. At the time, it sounded like nonsense, but after 15 years writing newspaper and magazine features for a living, I realized it makes perfect sense. The essence of good feature writing is excellent reporting.

And so that's why I'm in crab fisherman Alan Frederiksen's crab boat, getting raw material for "A Day in the Life of Florida Business," a freelance assignment for *Florida Trend* magazine. I'm enveloped in one of Frederiksen's rain parkas. My tape recorder is wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag, my notebook is splattered with salt spray. But there's no other way to see the iridescent shimmer of a blue crab's claws as it clings to the barnacle-encrusted wires of the fisherman's trap. And a telephone interview wouldn't enable me to write a passage like this one:

As morning commuter traffic rumbles over the Madeira Beach Causeway above, Frederiksen hits pay dirt: a fat stone crab. Deftly breaking off the crab's claws before tossing it overboard, Frederiksen says that the two claws alone will sell at his fish store for almost \$8.

Turning north in the shadow of waterfront condos, Frederiksen turns pessimistic on the future of commercial fishing in the state. "Crabbing is the one industry that will survive because the crab is a scavenger and he can live in different waters. But others—mullet, pompano, redfish, trout—they need a clean habitat, and people pollute."

Of course, writing features demands time at the desk, planning, drafting, revising and editing. But the most important part of the process is reporting. Without it you have no story. With it comes the inspiration, the excitement. Reporting is the sculptor's clay, the artist's palette, the doctor's vital signs. For the feature writer, the tools are significant details, the revelations of things said and left unsaid, the shape of narrative that forms the skeleton on which to hand the stuff of life. And the only way to obtain these elements is by putting in the time.

Much of my working time is spent hanging around, talking with people, listening, watching. A feature writer's workday is rarely

WELCOME TO THE FEATURES DEPARTMENT

nine to five. To report life in a crime-infested housing project, I spent the night in a tenant's apartment. To tell the story of a pediatric intensive care unit, I spent five full days there, and several evenings, including the late night when the life-support equipment was disconnected on a four-year-old boy pulled lifeless from a relative's swimming pool. To convey the life of a blind child, I went to school with him, to swim class, to summer camp, ate dinner with his family, watching and listening. While most of my stories have required sizable investments of time, I still work for a daily newspaper and often a story will not wait. "From Jon to Lani, the gift of life" told the story of two teenagers, a troubled girl and a clean-cut Boy Scout, who met on a train trestle after an Amtrak train severed the girl's leg. I got the assignment before lunch. It was finished before dinner. But no matter what the deadline, the essential qualities of reporting and writing remain the same: perseverance, curiosity, caring and above all, determination to find the truth and convey it in the most effective way in the time available. A feature written in a day is more of a snapshot of a story; the in-depth feature is the full-length portrait.

When I look back at the stories I've written over the years, what remains with me are the moments that captured time spent in the field, scenes from a day in the life of a feature writer, one that spans nearly two decades, half a dozen jobs, and hundreds of stories. Like all journalism, feature writing is the art of listening to what people say and what they do long enough to understand what they are all about.

7:30 A.M.

Barrington, Rhode Island

The Barton boys — Jed, 7, Bradford, 5, and Curtis, 3, are seated at the kitchen table, juice, bananas and toasted muffins before them. Jed is rubbing his right eye with his knuckles.

"Jed," his mother says sharply, "put your hand down and start eating."

The hand drops.

Jed never has to be told to stop sucking his thumb; eye-rubbing is the blind child's bad habit.

His breakfast waits, but he has to feel for it. He lifts his right hand off his lap. Fingers straight out, palm down. He starts at the edge of the table and makes a pass over the Formica. Slow and deliberate

until it is over the muffin. The hand hovers, like a spaceship, and then descends. The fingers make a circle, pick up the bread, bring it to his mouth. He puts it down and the hand reaches out again, looking for the cup. It stops when he feels the plastic.

"Is this mine?"

"Yes," his mother says, "that's yours."

The feature writer's mission is to convey the reality of life beyond the writer's experience. What's it like to be blinded at birth? What's it like when your child is born blind? Or, in another story, what's it like to smoke all your life and then be stricken with cancer? What's it like for those left behind? Those questions, natural ones for a former smoker like myself, became a story entitled "The Death of a Smoker" that told the tale of Peter DeMilio who had a bad cough at Christmas and was dead by the following Mother's Day, killed by the lung cancer caused by 50 years of smoking.

2 P.M.

Fort Myers, Florida

"I never saw a man go downhill so fast in my life," his daughter says. The transplanted northerner who used to laugh at Floridians wrapped in jackets in cool weather now couldn't go outside on sunny days without a heavy coat. Since New Year's DeMilio had lost nearly 50 pounds. His hair fell out, his muscles withered away. He developed the wasted condition known as cachexia, common to cancer patients, and his doctor noted, concentration camp victims.

... After her husband died, friends advised Mrs. DeMilio to get rid of Pete's things: it would make the adjustment easier. ... She used to open their bedroom closet and stare at his clothes, take them out, match up outfits for him to wear. After three months she finally gave them away. She kept his trench coat, his slippers. Sometimes she wears his blue and white warm-up jacket.

... Marie DeMilio is 58, a small, youthful woman with short-cropped reddish-blond hair. Grief has left its mark. Lined and tense when she talks about her husband's losing battles with tobacco and cancer, Mrs. DeMilio's face is transformed when she talks about Peter: His two left feet that couldn't accommodate a Lindy yet managed a beautiful fox-trot, his happiness on the water, how he loved to impress his family up North with his cowboy boots and hat.

Smiling at memories and snapshots in her albums, Marie DeMilio relaxes. Once again, it seems, she is a young woman very much in love with the boy who took her to the movies and held her hand as

they walked down the street. Mornings and nights are the hardest for her now.

"It feels like one big nightmare," she says. "Maybe I will wake up, and he will be in bed with me. But I know it's not going to be so.

"Would you believe it? I take his after-shave lotion and spray it on his pillow just so I can smell him. Just the smell of it makes me feel like he's with me."

I write because words unlock doors and open windows. I write features because I get to write about people's lives and can strive to convey emotional truths which to me seem universal and eternal.

Will Durant, the philosopher, once observed:

"Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting, and doing the things historians usually record; while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river."

So are most journalists. I write to make people feel, to make myself feel, and most of all, to ride the river, watching life on the banks.

For me, reporting is an act of seduction, first of my subject and then of the reader. I must convince the widow of the man who smoked for 50 years and died in six months, horribly, of lung cancer, to open their life to me in one afternoon. And when she tells me about sprinkling his after-shave on her pillow, my heart leaps because I have found a way to communicate her loss.

I must persuade the mother of a girl in Utah who disappeared 12 years ago, presumably snatched and murdered by serial killer Ted Bundy, to tell me how that horror shaped her family's life. And I must show her that I am different from the reporter who posed as a cop to get in her front door. And when she shows me the front porch light switch, left on 12 years before for the teenager due home that night, and the piece of tape on it that has made sure it has stayed burning, my heart leaps.

7 P.M.

Pawtuxet Village, Rhode Island

In the labor room at Kent County Memorial Hospital, Jackie Rushton rose from the stretcher, her face pale and smeared with tears. A nurse

pressed the fetal pulse detector against her abdomen, a taut mound stretched by seven months of pregnancy. The detector was blue, the size and shape of a pocket flashlight with earphones attached, and Jackie Rushton's eyes fixed on the nurse who strained to hear the bird-like beating of her baby's heart.

"Here's the heartbeat," the nurse said after several moments of silence. "It's 126 and it's fine."

If there's a heartbeat, why isn't she giving me the earphones so I can listen? Jackie thought. That's what the doctor always does when I have my checkups. First he listens, and then he says, "Here's the heartbeat. Listen." She didn't say, "Here's the heartbeat. Listen."

"I've lost the baby. The baby's gone."

Clearly, the writer doesn't always have to be present at the moment the story occurs. By its nature, narrative writing is an act of reconstruction, as in the opening of this piece that re-created the traumatic, but ultimately successful, birth of a baby.

Hannah Rushton had already been born by the time I heard the story of her emergency birth, but her parents' memories were still fresh the night a week later I sat in their living room. My friend Barbara Carton, a talented writer for *The Boston Globe*, uses the metaphor of portrait painting to describe her interviewing technique: You have to get people to sit still long enough to get every wrinkle. That's what I tried to do, and I pumped them for specifics. What happened then? What did it look like? What did you see? What did you say? How did you feel? What were you thinking at that moment?

Even so, I knew I couldn't reconstruct the night solely on the basis of their recollections, so I arranged to visit the maternity ward of the hospital. In the labor room, I saw the fetal detector and noticed that it looked like a pocket flashlight. I soaked in other details: the color of the room, the pictures on the wall, the overhead lamps in the operating room that looked like ice cream scoops. The use of such telling details represent what Joel Rawson, then deputy executive editor of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, called "pasting wafers" on a story, a reference to the last line of Chapter 9 in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a fierce wafer." Wafers are the images that make the reader see with the writer's eyes. They are the gold that the feature writer must pan for in every interview.

Donald Murray, writing coach for *The Boston Globe*, advises that stories start as near the end as possible. For the story of Hannah

WELCOME TO THE FEATURES DEPARTMENT

Rushton's birth, I looked for the moment where the outcome was in doubt. It had to be the point when Jackie thought her baby had died and the nurse was lying about the heartbeat. And that, I knew, had to be my lead since I figured readers would want, need, to know what was going to happen, and I could make them read until the end to find out. If there's a trick to feature writing, it's deceptively simple: Grab the throat and never let go.

And remember: Much of what you write will be discarded. Only a phrase on some draft pages will remain in the published version. In the beginning, lower your critical standards and accept whatever pap flows from your keyboard. The writing you think is wonderful will later prove to be dreck. The stuff you know is dreck will point you in the direction of better writing.

The only way to improve a piece of writing is to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and . . .

4 A.M.

Silver Spring, Maryland

To me, writing has always seemed like a roller coaster ride, dizzying heights of excitement and dips into valleys of despair.

Let's pick a point, arbitrarily, right after I've published a feature. Let's say it appeared on page one and people have said they liked it. I'm elated. That lasts a few seconds, replaced immediately by despair. "The story was a fluke," a little voice whispers. "Just a lucky break. You'll never be able to match it again. In fact, you'll probably never get another story idea again, and your bosses will realize you were just a flash in the pan."

But then another story idea appears; either my editor comes up with one or an idea occurs to me. I'm high again and as I launch into the reporting I start on a roll. But then an interview falls through, or I can't get to somebody. I'm back in the pits again. The only solution is to keep slogging away.

Have I got a story? That's what I'm asking myself as I come back to the office. I realize I can't let my boss know this. So I start pitching the story, and myself, and slowly, start climbing upwards again, convinced maybe there is a story here after all. But then I sit down to write and I realize it was a mirage. I start to sweat, the clock is ticking. Suddenly, at the very point of disaster, when I have hit what mountain climbers and runners call "the wall," I seem to get

