

Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide From the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University

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Abstract

A book review of *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*, edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call.

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Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide From the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University

Edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call

(Plume, New York, 2007. 287 pages.

\$15.00, paperback, ISBN 978-0-452-28755-6)

Review by Barbara Rixstine

It's two hours to deadline. Your fingers are tapping the keys, but the words in your head seem to have taken a holiday. This seems like the trillionth story you've had to put together on deadline this week, and there's nothing but dust where your creative flow used to be. Sound familiar?

Cheer up—there's help to be had at the local bookstore.

Telling True Stories is a compendium of articles about writing, reporting, news, and the newsroom. It could be a good, inexpensive resource for both the novice and the experienced writer in need of a little journalistic kick-start to rev up his or her own news story.

Written by journalists for journalists, the book helps writers and editors think about the work they're doing, why they do it, what may be missing from a story, and how a story might be written differently. It includes experiences in the editing trenches, a storyteller's lexicon, and on-the-road reporting.

Editor Mark Kramer is currently the director and writer-in-residence of the Nieman Program on Narrative Journalism at Harvard University. Prior to his appointment at Harvard, he spent a decade as writer-in-residence and professor of journalism at Boston University and a decade teaching at Smith College.

Editor Wendy Call is a freelance writer and editor based in Seattle. She has been a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs in southern Mexico, a scholar at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and writer-in-residence at Seattle's Richard Hugo House.

Telling True Stories contributors range from Jay Allison, an independent broadcast journalist who has received five Peabody Awards, to Tom Wolfe, the author of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and *The Right Stuff*.

Two Pulitzer Prize winners—David Halberstam and Tom French—weigh in with "The Narrative Idea" and "Sequencing: Text as Line," respectively.

Director and screenwriter Nora Ephron writes about "What Narrative Writers Can Learn From Screenwriters" and *Washington Post* writer Anne Hull discusses "Revising Over and Over Again."

Chicago Tribune reporter and editor Louise Kiernan talks about "Writing Complicated Stories."

People sometimes ask me, "Are you an investigative reporter, or a features reporter, or an explanatory reporter?" I never know how to answer. Why ask at all? Categorizing journalism is in part why many investigative stories are dull, feature stories can be superficial, and explanatory stories explain so little. For complicated stories, we need to combine all three. This blending is both my central goal and biggest challenge as a reporter. (p. 145)

The book also offers a suggested reading list, Web sites, Internet resources, a listing of contributors, and an extensive index. The last section offers career advice, including time management for writers, working with an agent, and book contracts.

I particularly enjoyed the fact that you can open the book to any page and find something valuable from someone who really knows how to write. While linear in structure, the book's articles can be read in any order the reader chooses.

Susan Orlean, one of my favorite writers and author of *The Orchid Thief*, contributes the concluding article, "A Passion for Writing."

We are a species that communicates, that wants to know about the rest of our species. As writers we go out and learn about the world, and then come back and tell others. Any story can be worth telling if the author is passionate about it. (p.285)

About the Reviewer

ACE member Barbara Rixstine is a communications specialist in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources Communications and Information Technology unit. Her e-mail address is brixstine2@unl.edu.

