

SHARE THIS PAGE:  

[Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [News](#) | [Membership](#) | [Bookstore](#) | [Contact](#)

[MEMBER LOGIN](#) | [JOIN](#)



Google™ Custom Search

THE WRITER'S COMPASS					
WRITING IN EDUCATION		About the Writers	Events &	PROFESSIONAL DIRECTORY	YOUNG WRITERS' HUB
Writers in Schools	Writing at University	Compass	Opportunities		About Us
Writing & Community	NAWE Magazine	Resources	Career Stories		Listings
NAWE Conference	Training and Events	One-to-One Services	Contact Us		Community
Free Insurance	Bookstore	Links	E-Bulletin Sign-Up		Ask The Hub
		Compass Points			Myths
					Blog
					Profiles
					Contact Us

Wed 18 November 2015

Current Issue

You are here: [Home](#) > [Writing in Education](#) > [Writing at University](#) > [Writing in Practice](#) > [Current Issue](#) > [Writing in Practice - Vol 1](#) > The Narrator as Detective

[Back](#)

The Narrator as Detective

Professor John Dale draws on his own experience investigating the unsolved murder of a famous police whistleblower in Sydney Australia and interrogates narratorial perspective within works of "true-crime" creative non-fiction.

Abstract

This essay examines the role of the narrator as detective in the construction of a non-fiction narrative based on an unsolved murder. The majority of so called “true-crime” books are written as long pieces of journalism with little investigation of character and a tendency to summarize and sensationalize events. However, there is scope for a different kind of narrative where the narrator, working alongside the reader, functions as a “real” detective to reconstruct from the words and documents of others a “true account” of the crime and to reveal its deeper implications. Drawing on the writer’s own experience in investigating the murder of a prominent police whistleblower in Sydney, Australia, this essay examines the technical and practical difficulties facing a writer when investigating an unsolved murder.

Keywords: narrative non-fiction, true crime, narrator as detective, unsolved murders, police corruption, noir, practice-based research

This essay examines the role of “the narrator as detective” in the construction of a non-fiction narrative based on an unsolved murder. Twenty years ago I began researching a book on New South Wales (NSW) police whistleblower and former prostitute Sallie-Anne Huckstepp, who was strangled and drowned in Sydney’s Centennial Park in 1986. Huckstepp first came to the public’s attention when she appeared on Australian national TV and accused one of the state’s most highly-decorated police detectives, Sergeant Roger Rogerson, of shooting her 22-year-old old lover, Warren Lanfranchi, in cold blood and stealing \$10,000 he was carrying to bribe police. The NSW Police Commissioner, the NSW police association and senior politicians ridiculed Huckstepp’s claims. However, the Lanfranchi shooting became the turning point in NSW police history. After his death, corrupt detectives began to attract media scrutiny and thirteen years after Huckstepp made her sensational claims, the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police uncovered evidence of systematic and widespread corruption. Sydney detectives were organizing and supervising crime as if it were the family business. What Huckstepp did was extraordinarily brave and foolish. She blew the lid on the corruption that was an intricate part of NSW police culture. She described the Drug Squad and Armed Hold-Up Squad as feeding off the very activities they were meant to prevent. Four and a half years after she went public with her claims, Huckstepp’s body was found floating face down in a city pond.

Certain crimes come to epitomize an era and the murder of Sallie-Anne Huckstepp exemplifies Sydney in the 1980s when senior detectives were running the illegal drug trade and organizing armed robberies; when corruption was an integral part of the NSW criminal justice system and malpractice, laziness and alcoholism were widespread in the police force. Not every crime is worthy of attention for the writer. There are many crimes committed that are shocking in themselves, and for the victims, but tell the reader nothing about the society in which they live. These crimes are often the preserve of the “true crime” book. However, there are other narratives that have deeper implications, where the narrator, working as a detective, penetrates below the surface of things. The murder of a female whistleblower was symptomatic of a period in Sydney when heroin was currency, and corruption and murder were the tools of the police.

Her murder remains officially unsolved, although it is known in the Sydney underworld who murdered her. My book, titled *Huckstepp: a Dangerous Life* (2000), uses the device of an unnamed narrator who returns to Sydney and begins an investigation into her killing. None of the names of the key individuals involved are altered, and the book does its best to be a factual account of events. It is based on over ninety interviews undertaken over six years, hundreds of transcripts of court and inquest proceedings, New South Wales and Australian Federal police files, National Crime Authority files, archival material and other original documents by and about Huckstepp that were discovered during the research.

Huckstepp contains elements of biography, true-crime and history. It was marketed as biography on the back cover but sold in bookshops as true-crime. It merges the genres of journalism and detective fiction. A distinguishing feature of the book is that the unnamed narrator descends into the text and, working as a detective, gathers information about her murder. He invites the reader’s participation in the detective process. He asks questions of witnesses and police who will talk, and speaks to friends and relatives of the deceased. He interviews her probation officer, her publisher and her lawyers.

“You have to give her credit for what she did,” a senior barrister said. “Back then New South Wales had arguably the most corrupt police force in the English-speaking world. Elite squads were organizing armed robberies, running the drug trade, extracting huge pay-offs from prostitution, gambling, licensing, and murdering criminals who got in their way. Huckstepp stood up and spoke out against it.”

The narrator researches archival material and attends court proceedings. He interacts with the characters dialogically as autonomous subjects. At times, when his presence is unnecessary, he is able to step back, particularly in the chapters dealing with Huckstepp’s past. At other times, in those chapters that deal with the ongoing police investigation into her murder, including the committal and trial of the main suspect, the narrator is more prominent. Chronology is manipulated so that the investigation into Huckstepp’s murder is juxtaposed with a parallel investigation into her background. The book begins with her death and ends with her arrest as a 15-year-old girl when she ran away from home to survive on the streets of Sydney’s Kings Cross.

Huckstepp is not as concerned with the killer(s) and their motivations as much as it is with the victim. There are ethical implications for the writer to consider in ensuring that a story of a murdered woman is told truthfully. There is also an obligation to stick to the facts of the case. How does a writer give voice to the dead? Because of the brutal nature of the crime (together with the fact that many of the people involved, including Huckstepp’s daughter and sister, are still living) the tone is serious. Empathy rather than irony is the intention.

One of the major difficulties in writing about a murder case is the positioning of the narrator in the text. Obviously the narrative style should be driven by the subject matter and great care taken to ensure that the narrator does not intrude. “Although many details of the story are expendable

from any summary,” Frus says, “the reader ought to learn of how the story of a non-fictional narrative became known” (Frus 1994). At the same time, the author has to be careful not to let the narrator take centre stage. Working as a detective, the narrator should blend into the surroundings, in order to listen, observe, ask questions and travel in the search for hidden truth. In *Huckstepp* the narrator fulfils the role of the traditional detective figure.

Faced with the discovery of a murder, the classical detective’s response was to disentangle the web of lies, misleading clues and disinformation surrounding the circumstances leading to the crime. Order was restored by ratiocination. The early “detective stories of Edgar Allen Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle begin with the recent impact of a crime and work backwards to restructure the incomplete fragments of present knowledge into a more intelligible whole and consequently to explain the past” (Hutter 1981). But a total reliance on the rational proved unsatisfactory and stories of pure puzzle fail to sustain in the reader a tension between mystery and solution. Ultimately they disappoint. “What saves Poe and Conan Doyle from sterility, is that the relentlessly logical process of ratiocination is thrown into question by a deeper irrationality” (Ibid.)

With the advent of the hard-boiled detective story in the early 1920s, the significant difference between it and its predecessor was the greater personal involvement on the part of the detective. He or she becomes emotionally involved and implicated in the story rather than solving the crime at arm’s length. “The hard-boiled detective’s investigation becomes not simply a matter of determining who the guilty person is but of defining his own moral position” (Cawelti 1976). The hard-boiled detective rejected the classical detective’s position that the existing social order is essentially benevolent and that murder and violent crime represent abnormal disruptions caused by a criminal subclass. On the contrary, the hard-boiled detective learned from experience that the violence and corruption he confronts are attributed to the society itself, the result of materialism and greed.

More than any other writer, Dashiell Hammett invented the hard-boiled detective and his work has “a philosophical power and seriousness beyond most other writers of hard-boiled detective stories. Like the greater works of Conrad, Crane, and Hemingway, his stories are essentially about the discovery that the comforting pieties of the past — belief in a benevolent universe, in progress, in romantic love — are illusions and that man is alone in a meaningless universe” (Cawelti 1976). Hammett transformed the generic formula in the direction of literature. Unlike most writers of detective stories, what Hammett did was to include “as part of the contingent and dramatic consciousness of his narrative the circumstance that the work of the detective is itself a fiction-making activity, a discovery or creation by fabrication of something new in the world” (Marcus 1974).

Faced with false information, the classical detective disassembles the chain of events and demonstrates a real and reassuring explanation that closes the text. What happens in Hammett is that the detective walks into a situation that has already been elaborately fabricated or framed and stirs things up. “What is revealed as ‘reality’ is still a further fiction-making activity. That is to say, Hammett is making a fiction in the real world; and this fiction, like the real world itself, is coherent but not necessarily rational. What one both begins and ends with, then, is a story, a narrative, a coherent, yet questionable account of the world” (Ibid.).

With *Huckstepp*, the narrator working as a detective tries to reconstruct from the words and documents of others a “true account” of what happened to her on the night of 6 February 1986. No matter how deeply he digs he can never be sure that what he uncovers represents the truth. The narrator has none of the resources of the police or the coroner and might not uncover any new evidence. This lack of omniscience, while on the one hand a major strength (it is often more convincing if the narrator admits not knowing the whole story), can also make the matter of interpretation problematical from the beginning. Since the narrator did not witness the murder, his project is to accumulate and organize all the witness accounts.

The role of the narrator as detective in the text is to gather information, to provide a link between an investigation into the past and the present. Like a good detective this narrator knows when to be silent. In *Huckstepp* a number of novelistic techniques are employed, including scene creation, quoted passages of documented dialogue, and the temporal restructure of the narrative. At the same time, authentic documents, including listening device transcripts, running sheets and official police statements of interview are inserted into the text:

“Is there anything further that you can tell us before I conclude this record of interview?” Detective Inspector Ralph asked.
Only that I believe that Warren was murdered in cold blood by Detective Sergeant Rogerson and was not carrying a gun.
Are you prepared to sign this record of interview?
Yes,” Huckstepp said.
INTERVIEW REMOVED FROM TYPEWRITER AND HANDED TO MRS HUCKSTEPP. TIME CONCLUDED 8.30pm. 15 JULY
1981.

There is a dual narrative that investigates not only Huckstepp's murder, and subsequent police and coronial investigations into that murder, but also the contradictions of her character.

"I was very fond of Sallie," the writer Richard Neville said. "She was pushing at the behavioural frontiers, she had a doomed quality about her I guess, tangled up with a sort of relishing of her own notoriety, an exaggerated fascination for the criminal milieu, rather a French thing really; it goes back to the poet Villon, the French have this fascination with the underworld. I think Sallie was rather a spontaneous woman, quite gutsy. She could've just shut up about the police, but she didn't."

Huckstepp involves a process of investigation in which the narrator informs the reader of his own narrative procedures while simultaneously attempting to reveal new evidence. The problem, however, is that the procedure — the accumulation of facts — may overshadow important revelations which may never come forth. William Nance has suggested that the element of chance plays an immensely important role in the writing of these kinds of narratives where the narrator works as a detective, and is one of the main reasons the field is so thinly populated. During the actual writing of *Huckstepp*, it was impossible to know what material would be uncovered or what would be revealed relating to the ongoing murder investigation.

From the beginning of the text we know that Huckstepp was murdered, but we don't know why, or by whom, nor do we know exactly what occurred. Possibilities are examined. There is the strong implication that NSW police ordered her death, but none of these questions can be answered conclusively. Even when the main suspect was committed for trial, an element of doubt still existed as to his role in her death. Why she was murdered is never answered satisfactorily. Much of what Huckstepp was involved with in the last weeks of her death, including her sexual relationship with a Federal police detective, remains a mystery.

The majority of "true-crime" books in Australia are still written as long pieces of journalism in a flat institutional style, with snatches of dialogue, no suspense, little sense of character, a dry neutral tone, and an inclination to summarize character and events rather than vividly recreate scenes, as in the following example:

By 1980, no criminal felt safe with Roger Rogerson around. He was hated but his power was overwhelming. His superiors condoned his actions. If Rogerson marked your card, you were as good as finished. (Goodsir 1991)

These true crime books are often published immediately after a trial ends and while the case remains newsworthy. The writer, very often a police reporter who has covered the case, is under pressure to submit their completed manuscript by the due date, sometimes in a major case like the Milat backpacker killings there may be competing books in the pipeline (Maynard 1996), and with such tight deadlines there is little opportunity left for any deeper analysis of the crime's significance or psychological exploration of the characters involved.

What the overwhelming majority of "true crime" books also lack is the application of fictional techniques: they are usually linear in structure, with limited inclusion of any scenes, and a matter-of-fact prose style. In contrast, Truman Capote said that what he wanted to do when writing *In Cold Blood*, was to "bring to journalism the techniques of fiction, which moves both horizontally and vertically at the same time: horizontally on the narrative side and vertically by entering inside its characters" (Inge 1987).

All too frequently with true crime books "a shocking story" concerning a violent crime or criminal is told rather than shown. Frus sees these true-crime books as being "more closely connected to antecedents such as the novels of sensation, gothic novels and detective fiction", than to documentary non-fiction (Frus 1994). The essential qualities of the latter consist of exhaustive research, scene-by-scene construction, a literary prose style and documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to being "invented" from the writer's mind (Lounsberry 1990).

Pizer (1974) used the term *documentary narrative* to refer to the kind of prose work in which "the author creates the impression that he or she has investigated the circumstances of an actual event and that he or she can prove the validity of their account of the event". By documentary, Pizer means that the writer tries to create an effect of circumstantiality, either by including verifiable documents and quotation or by appearing to do so. By narrative he means that the writer pays exceptional attention to chronology.

All narrative, of course, relies to some degree on the passage of time as a structural device. But in documentary narrative the writer is recurrently

[Join NAWF](#)
[Member Login](#)

[Current Issue](#)
[Forthcoming Issue](#)
[Article Search](#)
[Submissions Guidelines](#)

and explicitly exact about events in relation to time. “His narrative technique thus contributes to the effect of documentary authenticity. By placing in immediate juxtaposition two of the seemingly most verifiable aspects of experience — objects and the movements of the clock — the writer seeks to persuade us that his account is accurate and authentic, since its principal components can be checked” (Pizer 1974).

“I stayed on in the flat,” Huckstepp said in her sworn statement. “I waited, I watched the clock, I paced up and down about the place. At six o'clock my heart sank, I was sick. I went down to the phone box and rang Warren's father who told me Warren had been murdered. He asked me if I was prepared to go public? And I said, "Yes". He said, "You realize that if you tell exactly what happened your life will be in danger?"

Compared to a traditional novel, it is the structural design in this kind of creative work that is its most important technical achievement. When the story is not invented, much of the art, skill and imagination goes into the ordering and juxtaposing of events. “The kind of architectonic structures that you have to build,” Richard says, “that nobody ever teaches or talks about, are crucial to writing and have little to do with verbal abilities. They have to do with pattern ability and administrative abilities — generalship, if you will” (Rhodes 1990, cited in Sims 1990).

The dual narrative structure of *Huckstepp* investigates the mystery of her unsolved murder as well as the mystery of how an attractive Jewish woman from a privileged middle-class background became involved with criminals, drug dealers and corrupt police.

“Sallie always wanted to be somebody,” her sister Debra said. “She always wanted to be a star. If she couldn't make it in a straight sense she was going to make it in the underworld.”

The position of the all-knowing narrator is perfectly suitable for a text such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* where the crime is solved, where the murderers are captured, confess to their deeds, and are then tried and executed. Where everything — from the writer's point of view— is wrapped up neatly and tightly.

But what of the documentary or non-fiction narrative where the truth is unknown? What of the situation where neither the narrator nor the police nor anyone else knows for certain who the murderer or murderers are? What of the documentary narrative where the narrator is as much in the dark as the reader? Then the position of the narrator cannot, by definition, be all knowing.

This was the situation with *Huckstepp*, where the narrator working as a detective embarked on a journey of discovery. The narrator is uncertain whether he will discover anything of value and this uncertainty sometimes can be a major strength in the story and make the narrative more suspenseful.

Mikhail Bakhtin has written of the polyphonic novel where the narrator descends into the text, to be among his creatures (Bakhtin 1963, cited in Morris 1994). He or she is silent so that others may speak, and in speaking, enact their freedom. This kind of documentary narrative rejects any authorial excess of seeing and centres the narrative upon the interactive consciousness of the characters. Authorial consciousness is brought onto the same plane as that of the characters and interacts with them dialogically as autonomous subjects, not as objectified images held within the author's vision.

Significantly, as Bakhtin pointed out, this shift goes along with a shift of focus from seeing to hearing. In *Huckstepp*, the writing is less descriptive than in most fiction and more than half the text consists of spoken material, extracts from official documents, written statements and direct quotation from numerous interviews in the form of dialogue or snatches of conversation.

“While there's publicity I'll be safe,” Sallie told her probation officer. “Probably for the next twelve months, but each day after that I'll be less and less safe and Rogerson will get me in the end.”

The positioning of the narrator in the text is of fundamental importance in the writing of a documentary narrative where the narrator acts as a detective in investigating a real murder. A major technical problem for any writer is how much personal voice to admit. I felt it would be inappropriate in the investigation of a brutal murder such as Huckstepp's to place the narrator and his own musings on centre stage, filling the text with the singular first person pronoun.

On the other hand, should not the reader be made aware — at least to some extent — of how documentary material is gathered?

In comparing Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* with Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, published 14 years later, Frus sees many similarities between these two documentary narratives and one major difference. Both books deal with a violent, senseless crime by un-educated white males, the punishment for which is execution by the state, and both books include documents, interviews and transcripts to present the history of not only the criminals but of their small town settings — Holcomb, Kansas and Provo, Utah, respectively (Mailer 1980). In addition they use conventions of biography, autobiography, history and journalism to enrich the text.

However, according to Frus,

What is missing from the story of *In Cold Blood*, is an awareness of its process of production ... if we have no mention of an author or an equivalent source of the plot, we are liable to presume an omniscient author of an invented tale, or the absolute world of distant history (Frus 1994).

In other words, without some kind of reflexivity — such as a dramatized narrator — we can have no understanding of the creative nature of the documentary narrative, as of any discourse.

Working as a detective the narrator tries to reconstruct from the words and documents of others “a true fiction”, i.e., an account of what really happened. The narrator learns a great deal about the official investigation through documents and the words of others, but there is no easy solution to the enigma. By the very process of recording or describing a historical event, the author gives to that event a temporal structure, and the manipulation of chronology is a defining attribute of all narrative. Writing about the world, therefore, involves making a fiction of that world.

The figure of the detective is prefigured in that of the *flâneur*, the man who drifts around the streets of a modern metropolis, gazing at everything. As a skilled observer, the *flâneur* has a special interest in murder, seeking out and observing the physiognomy of the city and its inhabitants. In the course of his excavations the *flâneur* “examines the social location of figures, scenes and experiences that are constitutive of the detective story” (Frisby 1994). He stumbles upon the scene of a crime and during his search among the traces, clues and secrets, the narrator is transformed into a detective providing a specific instance of Peter Messent's more general description of the process of

digging into the discontinuous structure of the city (world) to find the clues which allow a way behind the facade and beneath the veils of the metropolitan exterior. The Detective sifts and sorts, using his reasoning powers to penetrate below the surface of things, entering the labyrinth or underworld of the city (Messent 1997).

By placing the narrator firmly in the text and by utilizing a wide range of fictional devices, the author brings a personal and accessible dimension to the narrative as well as a greater flexibility in the levels of narration. To trace the development of the narrator as detective in investigating a real-life murder is to move away from the author as the God-like creator to the author as producer of that event — organizing, re-arranging and, above all, exploring the unknown spaces. A common technique in classical detective fiction was for the narrator to be the detective's close friend or assistant, but in a documentary narrative such as *Huckstepp* the narrator has now replaced the detective.

No matter how deeply he digs he can never be sure that what he uncovers is the truth. There are no guarantees of success in a work that investigates a major unsolved crime such as murder. Although the narrator working as a detective may never find out for certain what happened on the night of 6 February 1986, or precisely why Sallie-Anne Huckstepp was murdered, he does learn during the course of his investigation a great deal about her past. Huckstepp was a woman of striking contradictions. At heart she wanted to be a corruption fighter and yet she was attracted to criminals, police and the Sydney underworld. She was courageous, reckless and foolhardy. She was intelligent yet she lacked commonsense. Attractive and born into a middle-class Jewish family in the wealthy eastern beach suburbs of Sydney, Huckstepp was extremely saleable as far as the media were concerned. Here was this glamorous ex-prostitute telling Australians she would be killed for speaking out. And then she was.

References

Algeo, A. (1996) *The Courtroom as Forum*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bakhtin, M. (1963) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. London: Edward Arnold.

Capote, T. (1967) *In Cold Blood*. London: Penguin.

Cawelti, J. G. (1976) *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dale, J. (2000) *Huckstepp*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Frisby, D. (1994) Walter Benjamin and Detection. *German Politics & Society*. 32 (Summer), 89-106.

Frus, P. (1994) *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodsir, D. (1991) *Line of Fire*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Hutter, A. (1981) "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction", in Most G. & Stowe, W. (eds) *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. San Diego: HBJ Publishers. 230-251.

Inge, M. T. (1987) (ed.) *Truman Capote: conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Lounsberry, B. (1990) *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Mailer, N. (1980) *The Executioner's Song*. London: Vintage.

Marcus, S. (1974) (ed.) *Dashiell Hammett The Continental Op*. New York: Random House.

Maynard, R. (1996) *Milat: The full horror of the Backpacker Murders*. Sydney: M. Gee & Price Publishing.

Messent, P. (1997) *Criminal Proceedings: The Contemporary American Crime Novel*. London: Pluto Press.

Morris, P. (1994) *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*. London: Edward Arnold.

Most, G. and Stowe, W. (1981) *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. San Diego: HBJ Publishers.

Nance, W. (1973) *The Worlds of Truman Capote*. London: Calders and Boyars Ltd.

Pizer, D. (1974) Documentary Narrative as Art: William Manchester and Truman Capote. Cited in Weber, R. (1974) *The Reporter as Artist: A look at the New Journalism Controversy*. New York: Hastings House.

Rhodes, R. (1984) The Literary Journalists. New York: Ballantine. Cited in Sims, N. (1984) *The Literary Journalists*. New York: Ballantine.

Sims, N. (1990) *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sims, N. (1984) *The Literary Journalists*. New York: Ballantine.

Weber, R. (1974) (ed.) *The Reporter as Artist: A look at the New Journalism Controversy*. New York: Hastings House.

John Dale is the author of six books including the best-selling *Huckstepp*, and two crime novels *The Dogs Are Barking* and *Dark Angel*, which won a Ned Kelly Award. His other books are a memoir, *Wild Life*, an investigation into the fatal shooting of his grandfather in 1940s Tasmania, and *Leaving Suzie Pye*, a campus novel which was translated into Turkish. His novella *Plenty* was published in 2013 and his new novel, *Detective Work*, is based on

an unsolved Sydney murder. He is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, and his website is www.john-dale.net.

[Back](#)



© National Association of Writers in Education 2010-2015

[Website Credits](#)

[Sitemap](#) | [Equal Opportunities](#) | [Website Terms](#)