Natural Narratives

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Book by book, project by project, it's usually hard to say who you are as a writer or what your long-term subject is. But with hindsight you start to see threads. By my third book I realized that I was always gravitating back to nature.

Nature, by the way, is what science writing is about. Science is one of our tools for understanding nature.

But I don't like to approach nature the way most people do -- which is in nature. I'm a nature writer who doesn't like to go camping. So I look at nature much closer to home: in backyards, on our plates, with respect to our everyday lives.

I think our usual understanding of what constitutes nature-writing is narrow and constricted. The usual narrative about nature is a "Man and Nature" story, the person in the woods having big thoughts or encountering adversity. I needed to find some other way to tell stories about nature, and I found there's enormous potential in moving beyond convention.

So here are seven principles for writing about nature and science in ways that depart from the usual approaches:

Get beyond the "humans-doing-stuff" definition of narrative.

Whether we're writing about nature or anything else, we can expand our concept of what narrative is. The more traditional definition is that narrative is made up of characters and their actions, set in scenes. This is true, but I'd argue that the characters don't have to be human.

You can build narrative out of systems: You can tell the story of how water gets from one place to another. You can build narratives out of other species. I've certainly done that; I've told stories about plants or animals and their history and used their point of view to animate a story. In my most recent book I use corn as a character to thread a path through the whole history of agriculture. I could have told the
story from the point of view of people, but it was more interesting to
tell it from the point of view of corn, and very animating.

You can also construct a narrative out of arguments, ideas. One of the
more challenging pieces I've written was "An Animal's Place," about
piece is an essay of ideas, but it's also a narrative about an
argument. It's a play Peter Singer, the animal rights philosopher, and
me as characters. The first line of the piece is, "The first time I
opened Peter Singer's 'Animal Liberation,' I was dining alone at the
Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare."

Here's the whole drama of that piece: Do I finish the steak or not? Can
I continue to eat meat while exploring this person's ideas? (This is a
principle of suspense I'll come back to later.) I set up a drama of me,
the narrator, grappling with Singer in my head. A narrative can also be
people thinking stuff, or people learning stuff. When you're stuck,
when you've mastered a whole subject and don't know where the narrative
thread is, your fall-back is always your own education, your learning
process. That's a narrative, too -- often a very useful one.

These approaches don't have to be fancy. I organized "Power Steer," a
piece about beef and the industrial livestock industry, simply by
telling the story of one animal. The story is a biography with a very
simple arc.

So think about doing narratives of ideas, of other species, of other
systems. Think about narrative in the broadest sense.

Follow systems.

During Watergate Woodward and Bernstein learned to "follow the money."
This is a very useful principle in writing about government and
politics. There are other things we can follow, too. If you use ecology
as a narrative principle, you can follow non-human systems. Ecology is
not just a subject; it's an approach, a way of thinking. The system
could be energy. Or carbon. Or a chemical. Or water. One of the
wonderful things about ecology is that it provides you with all your
transitions. When you follow an ecological system you'll find yourself
being carried from place to place to place. It's a wonderful organizing
device.

When you follow systems be sure that you:

Follow your "character" all the way.

What I mean by this is avoid short-hand. I was recently re-reading
Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," which is a wonderful piece of
journalism. She's the first person I can think of in the tradition of
environmental journalism who truly thinks ecologically. She follows
non-human things really effectively.

One of the things she does is follow things through to the point where
they really matter. She doesn't just say, "this organic phosphorous
insecticide is a neurotoxin." That's the kind of dull language you find
in most environmental journalism. Okay, it's true, but I want to know how it works. Carson follows the organic phosphorous insecticide until she is in a brain cell explaining how acetylcholine enables communication among our synapses. Acetylcholine, a chemical transmitter, is supposed to vanish very quickly. It's like serotonin; it's supposed to disappear from the system quickly once it does its work, or you get too many messages going back and forth. She writes that the insecticide stops the acetylcholine from breaking down or being taken up. So you get too many messages; it's as if you could never remove email from your queue when you're finished with it.

In "Silent Spring," "neurotoxin" comes to mean something. You can see it and you understand the havoc it wreaks in your brain.

I use this technique in "Power Steer." I follow the cow through its whole life cycle. But I also follow corn. In my reporting I learned that one of the most significant things about the way we raise cattle in this country is that we feed them a diet of corn. It's not something they're evolved to eat. So I write about what corn is doing in their rumens.

I follow the corn from the cow's rumen to the farm and what corn is doing on the farm and all the fossil fuel it takes to grow it. Then I follow that carbon all the way back to the war in Iraq and what we're doing in the Middle East to keep our steaks coming, our corn-fed meat. It's all connected.

So ecology can take you from the rumen of a cow all the way to the Persian Gulf, then forward again from the cow and the meat to our bodies and what that meat does to us.

Following a thing through a system is a powerful tool. It accomplishes something your editors are always driving you crazy about: Why should readers care? This technique can answer that question. All of us are in this ecological web, this food web. Following the web gives you a means for going wherever you want in pursuit of your subject, then traveling back to your reader, your reader's plate, brain, experience, etc.

Use first person strategically.

The first person is often badly used, especially in newspaper journalism. I tend to rely on it heavily, but if you look at my work you'll find that, even when it's there, you learn very little about me. I use it not in confession but as a narrative device.

The key is to realize that once you've made the decision that you're writing a first-person piece, you're not done. There's a second decision: Which first person? You have many identities when you're writing. For example, I could approach a piece as a gardener. Or as a Jew. Or a son. Or father. As someone who lives in Berkeley, Calif. As any number of identities. When you're writing in first person, you're not using your whole identity. You're choosing what is useful to your story.

With "Power Steer," I wrote as a carnivore. This was an important choice. Because if I'd written about the meat industry as a vegetarian,
nobody would have read what I wrote. I needed to start where my reader was. And odds were that my New-York-Times reader was a carnivore. It's also much more interesting to find out what happens to a carnivore after he's gone into the heart of darkness of the modern American meat industry than what happens to a vegetarian. Because you know exactly what would happen to a vegetarian: He'd say, "See, I told you so." That's not very interesting.

So choose your first person deliberately. Too many newspaper first persons -- and a lot of magazine first persons too -- are written in the voice of the neutral feature-writer. They're the voice of the Journalist. That is the least interesting first person you have. Nobody cares about journalists. They're not normal people. So choose a first person that draws on a more normal side of your personality. And think about which one will help you tell the story. You'll see that in very subtle ways it will shape your point of view and your tone and unlock interesting things.

You may find as you're writing that you've chosen the wrong first person; in that case you need to try again. Early in the story you're establishing your character. And you as narrator are a character. Not that you're making anything up when you shape that character, but you're being selective -- you're creating a character on the page.

So eschew the Journalist. Also reject the Expert. This brings me to pillar number five.

Write as an idiot. (Or at least as an amateur.)

Journalists often write as people who have mastered subjects and are telling you about them. That's a real turn-off for readers. In my work I often begin as a na•f. It's a good place to start because it's a lot closer to where your reader is. Instead of starting as someone who knows the answers, you begin as someone learning about something. That's a good way to connect with readers.

i often underscore my ignorance in the beginning of pieces. By the time I write my lead I'm not ignorant, but I can begin my story at the point where I was. I'm not lying; I'm playing up where I was when I started. This way I've got the drama, as I said above, of learning.

Humor is important.

You would think that, in writing about nature, humor is hard to do, what with the environmental tragedies unfolding all around us. But finding the funny line is an important way to engage your readers. You can look at nature as this grand tragedy where we're screwing things up, or you can look at it as a situation of amazing absurdities and ironies, of nature pulling the rug out from under our feet all the time. Nature takes our fondest conceits and arrogant ideas and puts them in perspective, ironizes them.

Depending on how you choose your first person, there will be humorous possibilities. That's part of the reason to write as an idiot. You'll be a fish out of water, doing things you're ill-equipped to do. You
will be falling on your face, and that's often funny. In my own books I often have adventures where I do things I'm not equipped to do. In "Power Steer" I bought a beef cow. I became a sort of baby rancher. I didn't know anything. In the piece I go to a feed lot and try to find my steer, walking around through the cow manure. In other work I've gone hunting. I've had a war with a woodchuck. I often do things in my stories, and it doesn't always go well.

Choose the right first person, or the right narrative conceit, and you will open up some prospects for humor.

Build suspense.

Suspense is a principle of all narrative, of course. But we can misconstrue what suspense is. Simple things can give you suspense. In "An Animal's Place" the suspense is, "Will he still be able to eat meat? Is he going to eat the steak?" It's very simple.

Your structure can give you suspense. Where the piece starts can give you suspense. In the Odyssey, Homer doesn't start at the beginning but in medias res, in the middle of the story. He starts at Odysseus's court; Odysseus is gone and suitors have taken over and chaos has broken out. Odysseus's son is moping, and suitors are coming after Odysseus's wife. His world is threatened. But the story is not going to stay there; it's going to show Odysseus, who's got to get home. So the suspense begins as, "How is Odysseus going to get from where he is to that place we just saw?" That's the suspense. Showing us where we're headed lends tension to the narrative. We wonder how we're going to get there.

So sometimes when you choose to start your narrative not in the beginning but somewhere along the way, you create energy or suspense. There are other ways, too. One is to pose a really good question. If in your opening you pose a question, people will read along to get the answer.

The question "What's going to happen?" can be posed in the world of thoughts, too. "Who's going to win this argument?" "Who's going to come out on top?" It's very important in the beginning of such a narrative that you set such a question up. Because that's what will determine whether people will keep reading or drop you.

One of the important keys to narrative journalism -- and it flies in the face of most newspaper training -- is that you have to withhold. You can't put all the best stuff in the first column. No one's going to read to the end once you've used up all your best stuff. It's a tricky principle: How do you withhold and get readers interested, hooked? Plus, how do you avoid being coy? This is a real challenge, but you have to hold off some important information -- and signal what you will get if you come along for the ride.