

Book Review: An Idiosyncratic Hero's Journey to Writing like Yourself

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Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process. John McPhee. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017. 192 pp. \$25.00 hardback.

For as long as I have been teaching creative nonfiction or narrative writing or magazine writing or longform journalism or whatever that genre is called these days, I have been singing the praises of John McPhee to my students. His prose isn't flashy like Tom Wolfe's. He isn't trapped in his own radical subjectivity like Hunter S. Thompson. He is thorough, patient, precise, and to my tastes, utterly enthralling. But sometimes he is a hard sell for the students. "Yes, it's a whole book about oranges," I'll say. Or: "Right, shad. The fish. It's about a fish. But it's about more than a fish."

McPhee takes unsexy subjects, couches them in plain but compelling prose, and somehow spins 90,000-word books out of them. Now, with his collection *Draft No. 4*, McPhee turns his reportorial eye on himself, revealing a few things about his process. But he does it in a typical John McPhee way—which is to say that some writers (and here I mean, especially, students) will hang on every seemingly digressive anecdote, and some will exhale frustratedly through clenched teeth and drop your course when you assign it to them.

I assigned this book as a sort of textbook for a course called Magazine Writing. I paired the first chapter with Sam Anderson's excellent profile of McPhee from *The New York Times Magazine* and McPhee's own structural tour de force, "The Search for Marvin Gardens." In a class of 18, I have now created two or three McPhee acolytes, and one sworn McPhee hater.

This book is not a textbook. It is a collection of eight essays of varying length on topics related to writing long nonfiction works. Two chapters are about structure. One discusses the relationship between writers and their editors and publishers. One covers getting people to talk to you. One is about frame of reference—knowing how much your readers will know, and how much to explain. One talks about working with *The New Yorker's* vaunted fact-checking department. The title essay makes the argument that you have to write the thing four times before it's ready to go. And he ends on an essay about knowing which pieces to leave out of your work.

The book is easy enough to work into a syllabus because of that, but students who need a real guidebook for how to write a magazine piece will want to look elsewhere. McPhee doesn't tell anyone how to write, despite having taught a nonfiction writing class at Princeton for decades. You can't really get much from the inscrutable diagrams he includes of the structures of some of his pieces—even if you read the pieces side by side with *Draft No. 4*. One of them spirals like an upside-down snail shell, from an inner point marked "Turtle" past a hash mark labeled "Stream Channelization" outward to a line that slithers past "Rattlesnake, Muskrat, etc." This is all in service of saying that when you are structuring

a piece through the use of flashbacks, you have to watch your verb tenses, but that if you're careful, the reader will follow you.

McPhee also spends a surprisingly large bit of one chapter detailing a defunct database and word-processing system that he uses in composing his works. He admits that, realistically, no one else would ever want to write a story that way. Even if they did, they would have to find someone who could rig up a system to work on. No one will do it. Certainly not my students. But that's not the point. The point is, as McPhee well knows, all serious writers have idiosyncrasies. We can coach writers. We can offer tips and advice. But for the truly elite writers, the ones who will someday eclipse their teachers in skill, there's not one way to get the work done.

"What counts is a finished piece," he writes, "and how you get there is idiosyncratic." If there is a thesis to *Draft No. 4*, that would be it.

And it is a lesson that advanced student writers need to learn. Yes, sure, freshman year, give them a lecture on how to write a lead (or a lede) and a nut graph (a structural tic in magazine writing that makes McPhee shudder). Show them some solid templates for a story. But make sure the really good students know that someday they'll outgrow these crutches, and their prose styles will develop their own distinctive gaits.

McPhee loves anecdotes. Or perhaps it is more flattering to say that he loves telling stories. But he is a raconteur more than he is a pedagogue. Many students—I'd posit that it is the strongest students—will get that these stories are meant to be illustrative, allusive, even allegorical. They will understand why McPhee doesn't dictate to them, in the same way that I have refrained from dictating styles or topics to the students in my magazine writing course. They are all different. The strongest students will understand why even though they're used to opening their stories with anecdotes, McPhee ends his entire book with one, about Dwight Eisenhower painting still lifes (trust me, it makes sense in context).

The students who want to be shown a path, to be given structure, will (ironically, given McPhee's emphasis on structure) not like this. But then again, even those strong writers who already know themselves may not like McPhee. My one McPhee holdout is an excellent writer with a real understanding of her own voice. She finds him interminably rambling—but I think she would do just fine in McPhee's course.