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English 210

Narrative Journalism Essay

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Breaking News: How New Journalism Turns Traditional Reporting Up On Its Head

 I found our readings on New Journalism… interesting, to say the least. Well, some were interesting, others were just boring, and some were straight up confusing as hell. However, from two essays in particular I gleaned a very good understanding of the essence of New Journalism, in not just their excellent reporting, but also how the authors’ were able to seamlessly insert their own viewpoints. These essays were “The Search for Marvin Gardens”, by John McPhee and “Okinawa: The Bloodiest Battle of All”, by William Manchester. These two essays successfully blend reporting facts with their own personal touch. McPhee does this by combining his story on the poor state of Atlantic City with an account of him playing Monopoly in a tournament, and Manchester does this by comparing how we perceive and glorify war with his own personal life and military experiences.

 In “The Search for Marvin Gardens”, John McPhee gives his subject, the commercial downfall of Atlantic City, a more easily understandable context by pairing it with a play-by-play commentary on a Monopoly tournament, as Monopoly, he explains, is based on Atlantic City. He begins with the game, as this will more easily hook a reader, and then begins to detail the history of Atlantic City, purposefully built as a central hub for railroads in New Jersey in 1852.

The transitions here are masterful, and the essay flows seamlessly. In some other essays we read, the subject matter seemed to change on a whim and the essay jumped all over the place, making it hard to keep up and clearly identify the overall point and theme. However, this essay is very well structured. Whenever McPhee lands on a property, or interacts with it in the game, the perspective switches to that actual property in Atlantic City. It's such a simple idea yet it's so incredibly effective and engaging that it’s mind blowing. I know for sure that I will never look at a Monopoly board the same way again. In his first paragraph, McPhee comes out swinging. I remember sitting in the dining hall after I had finished my lunch, half asleep, and opening my book to do my reading. “Go. I roll the dice - a six and a two. Through the air I move my token, the flatiron, to Vermont Avenue,” I yawn. Yay, an essay about Monopoly. How riveting. I can feel myself getting angry at my family members already… “where dog packs range.” (361). Well then. I’ve played several versions of Monopoly, under several sets of house rules, but I don't remember anything about dog packs on Vermont Avenue? “The dogs are moving (some are limping) through ruins, rubble, fire damage, open garbage. Doorways are gone… A sign - ‘Slow, Children at Play’ - has been bent backward by an automobile.” (361). Oh, okay then! Now, now you have my attention.

From here, McPhee takes his readers on a journey throughout Atlantic City with the preface of Monopoly as his vessel. McPhee is a master of imagery and characterization, it is hard to not feel as if you are there with him in Atlantic City. Through simple dialogue and descriptions, the people on the street that McPhee encounters are still given depth to them. McPhee uses Monopoly to help the audience more easily engage with his topic, the names of the streets he walks have more meaning in this way. When a property is bought for just a few hundred dollars, and then McPhee takes you down its streets, full of broken glass, with the remnants of old business and closed down hotels that were once the most opulent in their day, his interactions with the people who remain, trying to scrape by, allows him to hammer home his views. It is a jarring look on urban poverty in Atlantic City and how the city has fallen from grace.

 Next, in “Okinawa: The Bloodiest Battle of All”, William Manchester tells the story of Okinawa, through his own experiences. No one can truly understand what war is like, which is why it is so important that he details exactly what it was like. This is why Manchester also details how war is and has been perceived throughout time, and especially in American culture. He notes how war has changed over time, how all the honor has left it. Yet he focuses on how we still associate war, and the sacrifice of life during it, with glory, duty, patriotism, and honor. One of my favorite quotes from this essay is “‘A man won’t sell you his life, but he’ll give it to you for a piece of colored ribbon.’” (501). This quote is an excellent example of why men are willing to go through so much and to risk their lives during war for the idea of honor they had been indoctrinated into at home.

Manchester especially focuses on his own experiences with these ideals held at home. He describes watching his father march, with one arm missing, in his towns Memorial Day Parade, and how he revered him and the other veterans and wanted to be like them, how he wanted to be strong and look sharp in a uniform. However, after returning home injured from Okinawa, he recalls how John Wayne was brought into his military hospital. They thought seeing an iconic America figure like him would cheer up the wounded soldiers. It did not. In fact, William Manchester personally joined in on booing John Wayne. As he says “This man was a symbol of the fake machismo we had come to hate” (505).

“So we weren’t macho” He says (505). And if they weren’t fighting for honor and glory as they were at home, then what were they fighting for? Manchester even mentions how the atom bombs almost made Okinawa, and the lives lost on it, pointless. However at the end of the essay, Manchester reminds his readers that despite this, they still fought on, because they knew, even without honor, or being macho, that what they were fighting for was right. Especially early in the war, they knew they could not afford to fail, and even late in the war they knew that they needed to keep going to push Japan into a total surrender.

 Manchester ends his essay by describing his encounter with a former Japanese soldier on Guadalcanal. He thought it would be easy. The two men had never even met before, they had not fought against each other. However when they met, a primal rage gripped them. The memories of the war, of those they had lost, it was still there. “Nations may make peace. It is harder for fighting men.” (506). This encounter cements Manchester’s views on war. It is terrible, and even though the men fighting in, it may believe that what they are doing is the right thing, that their cause is just, they will still carry the weight of the war with them for the rest of their lives, never able to truly leave it behind.

Works Cited

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