

'It Takes as Long as it Takes:' And Other Writing Advice Given To, and By, the Legendary John McPhee

Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process

by John McPhee

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Book Review by David Hayes

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Draft No. 4 is an odd book to be getting the kind of attention it has attracted from the mainstream media. It is, after all, a writing manual – not the sort of book that normally reaches an audience beyond writers and editors – the kind of book that generates little noise and creeps quietly onto university and college reading lists. In this case, though, the author in question is John McPhee, the legendary *New Yorker* staff writer, author of 32 books and a preeminent figure in creative nonfiction. He is also the instructor of an equally legendary course at Princeton called “Creative Non-Fiction” whose alumni include the current *New Yorker* editor David Remnick and a slew of other professionals scattered throughout the media. But really, *Draft No. 4* could engage anyone who is an avid reader and has ever tried to effectively express themselves in writing.

The chapters – several of which have appeared in *The New Yorker* over the past half-dozen years – are organized thematically, beginning with story ideas and structure, moving on to conducting interviews and fact-checking, and sprinkled with thoughts about the writing process itself. (*Draft No. 4* refers to the number of drafts it takes for McPhee to feel comfortable with one of his stories.) The book isn't simply a “how-to-write,” though. McPhee scatters throughout the text details about his background as well as consistently entertaining anecdotes from his experiences as a journalist.

Structure, he explains, underpins everything in nonfiction writing. It is “like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what's there is what you deal with, and all you deal with. If something is red and globular, you don't call it a tomato if it's a bell pepper...”

He goes on to break down the structure of several of his most famous stories, some of them revealing in their complexity. For example:

$$\frac{A \quad B \quad C}{D}$$

In the late 1960s, McPhee decided he wanted to structure a story this way without knowing whom or what the story would be about. It was the early years of the environmental movement so he decided the protagonist (D) would be an environmentalist facing three antagonists (A, B, C). All he had to do was find the

characters and hope they would cooperate. He selected as a protagonist David Brower, then-executive director of the Sierra Club and known to be an evangelical and combative activist. The antagonists were a builder of dams, a mining geologist and a resort developer. McPhee arranged for Brower to meet with each antagonist in an appropriate setting: a mountain slated for mining exploration, an island where a resort was being planned, and a river on which a dam was to be built. The resulting story, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, reads like a novel but is entirely factual.

I have used this example in feature writing classes many times in order to demonstrate that, no, writers don't always miraculously appear at dramatic scenes; sometimes they suggest them and, if the subjects are willing, put the wheels in motion. You don't make up facts in creative nonfiction, but as McPhee notes, a writer plans and intervenes so it also can't be called unalloyed reality. For further proof, refer to his example of the structural plan for his book, *Looking for a Ship*, which looks like a schematic diagram for a motherboard.

I nodded in recognition when McPhee explained that there are two kinds of writers – “those who are overtly insecure and those who are covertly insecure” – and each needs the help of editors who are both smart and tough. It isn't news to anyone who works in the writing business today that, in the age of digital content and clickbait, those kinds of editors are increasingly rare, and even the best ones have trouble making time to work with writers the way editors worked with McPhee. Referring to the multiple hours he spent with former *New Yorker* editor William Shawn discussing the fine points of a feature, McPhee finally asked him, “How can you afford to use so much time and go into so many things in such detail with just one writer when this whole enterprise is yours to keep together?”

Shawn said, “It takes as long as it takes.”

This is not the world of journalism today.

A writer's insecurity comes in many forms. Many of my students have said that what they most fear is appearing to be naive when talking to subjects who are experts in their field. McPhee addresses this in a chapter called Elicitation. “I have no technique for asking questions,” he writes cheerfully. “I just stay there and fade away as I watch people do what they do.”

This doesn't quite answer the question, but he goes on to illustrate his point with a hypothetical example – which may be real, considering McPhee won a Pulitzer Prize in 1999 for a geological history of North America. Imagine standing on a mountain outcrop, he writes, with a dozen or so knowledgeable geologists who begin arguing about “delaminated basements, welding batholiths, and controversial aspects of tectonostratigraphy” at a time when you, the writer, are “on the low side of the learning curve.” What to do? At 86, McPhee is a traditionalist in many ways. His reporting tools usually consist of a pencil and a lined four-by-six notebook. But he is not entirely anti-technology, and his solution in this case is simple: “Put a voice recorder on the outcrop... You can read up later on what it all means.”

There are times when McPhee meanders away from advice on writing to include memoir-like stories from his long career. Celebrities appear in *Draft No. 4*, although probably not ones the average millennial will know. There is a wonderful section describing interviews he conducted with Richard Burton in London while the actor was starring in *Hamlet*, in the hotel room Burton was sharing with Elizabeth Taylor. (Both were glamorous young stars at the time; both were married to others; today their affair would light up the internet.)

In a chapter called Frame of Reference, McPhee talks about those “things and people you choose to allude to in order to advance [a story’s] comprehensibility.” But for future generations, do these allusions illuminate or simply puzzle or irritate? If I wrote “as big as Jackie Gleason” it would be a cultural reference only useful to those older than 60. As McPhee puts it, “if you say someone looks like Tom Cruise – and you let it go at that – you are asking Tom Cruise to do your writing for you.” And if your writing lives as long as McPhee’s has, Cruise, too – along with Adele, Jon Stewart, *Game of Thrones*, Pokemon, and Goop – will go the way of Jackie Gleason.

While *Draft No. 4* is charmingly idiosyncratic, sometimes it veers into remarkably arcane territory. At one point, McPhee explains (in enough detail that many readers will probably skim) how he graduated from an Underwood manual typewriter to a text editor called Kedit (*Kay-Edit*). “Kedit,” he writes, “did not paginate, italicize, approve of spelling, or screw around with headers, wysiwygs, thesauruses, dictionaries, footnotes, or Sanskrit fonts.” What Kedit did, and still does (McPhee uses it to this day), is function “in imitation of the way I had gone about things for two and a half decades.”

If there is a dominant theme here, other than writing, it would be McPhee’s lifelong interest in the environment and science. He’s loved the outdoors all his life and, as a boy, he went to a summer camp called Keewaydin that focused on canoe travel. He’s written about canoe builders (*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*); the New Jersey wilderness (*The Pine Barrens*); Alaska (*Coming Into the Country*); the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (*The Control of Nature*); aeronautics (in *The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed*, about the creation of a flying machine that is part plane, part dirigible); America’s nuclear installations (in *The Curve of Binding Energy and The Atlantic Generating Station*); and geology (in his four-book series, *Annals of the Former World*).

But *Draft No. 4* is, first and foremost, about writing and how it’s done. Everything about McPhee’s art and craft is summarized in this observation: “Creativity lies in what you choose to write about, how you go about doing it, the arrangement through which you present things, the skill and the touch with which you describe people and succeed in developing them as characters, the rhythms of your prose, the integrity of the composition, the anatomy of the piece (does it get up and walk around on its own?), the extent to which you see and tell the story that exists in your material, and so forth. Creative nonfiction is not making something up but making the most of what you have.”

Imagine trying to do that in today's era of story quotas, fake news, analytics-driven reporting, and the rush to publish everything faster than a speeding Tweet.