

*The Transom Review*  
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Mark Kramer  
(Edited by Sydney Lewis)

## Intro from Jay Allison

Mark Kramer is a story guy, to the bone. He's been an advocate and defender of narrative journalism in print media for years; he's a writer himself and runs the Nieman Conference at Harvard, which is one of the best journalism confabs going.

Once, the notion of narrative sensibility in public radio was a given, but as we become more driven by a relentless news cycle, and use our limited listener-moments for unlayered information delivery, this is no longer necessarily true. Further, as our institutions become more mature and entrenched, we need to work to keep them from losing their vigor and individuality. In his manifesto for Transom, "Voice and Meaning", Mark tackles the key questions of tone, voice, and story—important considerations for anyone wanting an audience. Read him and engage in the conversation.



Mark Kramer

## Manifesto - Voice and Meaning

Dear Transomistas,

It was daunting to have Jay Allison's invitation to be a guest on Transom.org, because I'm no insider to radio production. I do work in a cousin-genre—narrative journalism in print—in books, magazines, weekly and daily papers. There's substantial overlap, but natural differences. A few public radio people often joined ten or a dozen print journalists in my writing workshops during my decade as a writer-in-residence at Boston U. and some join my writing workshop at Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism.

My writing seminars work on print pieces, and the radio folks are always among the quickest and most fluent at structure—at treating a piece not as a topical outline, but an assembly of sequential experience for audience-members, arranged so the listeners and readers dip in, as needed, to some ongoing story, to background info, to other relevant-to-glimpse side stories, and coming back, perhaps repeatedly, to the main tale.

On the other hand, the radio (and film) people, when writing print articles, seem less likely to imply relevant nuances of character. And sometimes they need reminding to include a few just-right sensory details that nail down for the audience the immediacy of a set scene. Perhaps they sometimes do this part of print-piece construction haphazardly because in broadcast production, ambient sound and the attitudes redolent in a subject's voice and recorded situation often accomplish that work in passing.

And it isn't always clear in early drafts when the radio people intend some print passages to be taken ironically—as utterance to be doubted—a handy device to signal distancing from some character's statement or to make the audience question a proffered explanation. The

radio folks often justly count on a character's or a moderator's tone of voice—not words or specification of detail—to transmit the same signal quite forcefully.

Over the years, I've coproduced a handful of public radio pieces and a public TV documentary. I've learned from these few efforts, and from teaching radio people in my writing workshops, and also from daily life as an affectionate listener to our Boston public radio stations: WBUR and WGBH. These experiences lead me to suggest that we devote some time and space to exploring the role of VOICE in narrative work—appropriately, a term that implies tone, an audio matter.

We navigate the world taking in not just the nominal, stated, surface-content of spoken information, but also unstated, subtextual emotional cues, forceful but nearly untranslatably subtle information contained in tone of voice. This information about personality comes to us through phrasing and melody. Without even being acknowledged, it comes to us that this or that character we are listening to in a radio piece is in an emotional state of: ferocity, or silliness or fury, despondence, detachment, lightheartedness, confusion, ignorance, authoritative confidence—these are just a few samples among many delicate, elusive emotional circumstances that determine a listener's take on the meaning of a piece as surely as any list of concrete facts does.

I'm told that radio people use the term 'voice' another way—as a verb, as in 'I'm going to go voice my words...' meaning sit in the studio and record one's written text—one's introductory material or voice-over ambient sounds, or segues between actualities.

Here, the term VOICE is related to that informal radio verb, but it's used, unsurprisingly, as writing teachers use it: *Voice is the personality of the teller of the story*. Defining it that way sets it up as something determined by audience perception, as well as issued forth by the writer—*it's an audience-members' ongoing, developing sense of the person who's telling of the story*.

In writing your script, if you can deepen and broaden and complicate the storyteller's voice, you can deepen and broaden and render more complexly human the content of the work.

Let me offer you a story that we might as well call:

### **THE NIGHT OF THE BARKING DOG AND THE FIRETRUCKS**

Throaty barks awaken me. I squint at the clock. Hmm, it's 2:17 a.m. and I'm now in a fix. I've got to teach tomorrow, and I have a writing deadline; I'm annoyed because I teach grumpily and write ploddingly on three hours of sleep.

Asleep and awake, it's the nature of the human beast to scan for danger constantly, assisted by our delicate five senses, a portion of intellect, and adequate memory. A powerful narrative sensibility, seemingly hardwired in each of us, evaluates what the senses and intellect and memory divine, especially after one of the senses sounds its warning beep-beep that a danger threshold may have been crossed.

Beep-beep—there's a slight smoky smell of smoke. Nope, no fire, just a cigarette smoker on the street below. I drift half-awake, jolted again by more of those barks.

I evaluate the threat by trying on a sequence of barking-dog narratives for fit:

a. Marauding wolves have come down from the steppes—I must barricade the house and find my axe.

Well—no steppes near here. I haven't seen my axe in years; and anyhow, there's just one barking creature—no pack.

b. My sons are up late, they've got Lassie on, and I must go shut the TV or at least their bedroom



door. I shuffle down the hall. Both sons are out cold, the one breathing deeply, the other snoring quietly, neither barking.

c. Hadn't I vaguely noted—perhaps while walking home—that this neighborhood guy, only know him to nod, was out there this evening, being hauled along by a new, huge, high-strung mutt that was barking and leaning its way down the street? In fact, I convince myself that I recognize the dog-voice. The Narrative Way has reassured me that I'm not about to be devoured.

Now that story has helped me define and estimate the danger, a defensive plan springs to mind: close window and find ear plugs. I sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Brain scientists tell us that narrative is part of the scouting-for-trouble toolkit that has evolved right along with the human condition, an ancient cognitive skill that does for each of us what sentinels used to do for the towns they watched over from atop high encircling walls.

Sentinel work is awfully close to what journalists do, in the daily paper or on the morning news. Reporters scan the modern world and report to local listeners and readers. They scout for trouble, and also for that antidote to communal trouble--sources of social cohesion within a community. They report on terrorists probing our gates, and they congratulate the local ball team, covering in one short newscast, community danger from without, and community bonding from within.

\* \* \* \*

I'm awakened again.

This time, it's fire trucks squawking outside the window. I squint at the clock. An hour has passed. It's 3:17. I recall that class I've got to teach and that looming article deadline. I feel for my spectacles, sigh, and peer out the window. The fire trucks are awfully loud, and they're not even right below the window. They're up the street, setting up a block away by some shops and old houses. That's far enough off (I check this theory by constructing a few quick narrative scenarios about how flames might spread, or not) so there's no danger. I pull a pillow over my head again.

At seven, as usual, I'm up, soon down the street in a line at the neighborhood coffee shop. I'm a dutiful citizen. That's where I habitually ingest the day's newspaper along with a morning latte. I also catch the news on the coffee shop radio, which is always set to Morning Edition.

And here comes that damned neighbor, pulled by the barking dog, which he ties up outside. He joins the line behind me. I want to complain about the dog, but find forgiveness in my soul and instead settle for asking, "Did those fire trucks wake you up, too, last night?"

"You bet they did," he says, "First this new dog of mine wakes me, and then it's the fire trucks, right in front of my apartment!" He points out at the street. "I couldn't sleep with all that racket outside my window. I work as a reporter at the local paper, so even though I knew I'd be tired, I slipped on my bathrobe and slippers and walked outside to check things out . . ."

Well, this is downright optimal for me as a news consumer. Here's a genuine local reporter, and he's eyewitness to the cataclysmic ferocity, the sudden personal loss times the number burned out souls, of an apartment-house fire. I ask him the reader's basic question: "What happened?"

And looking right at me in general (I am news-audience now), ignoring me in particular (it's his mission to inform the citizenry, not chat with his neighbor), he says in emotionless radio-reporter voice: "A fire at the corner of Third and Elm Streets destroyed several units in the north wing of Brookville Apartments, 123 Brookville Street. Damage is estimated at \$800,000, according to Assistant Fire Chief Charles J. McGillicuddy. There were no reported casualties. The cause of the early-morning blaze is under investigation."

And what do I do? I mean, this is a social situation. Citizenship is one thing, but do I really want to be stuck at breakfast with this wooden character?

I duck. I move away. It's morning news time, and here's the walking, talking morning news. One might even argue that I've lucked out and a local, reliable, factual, professional source, and like the rolled up paper that comes flying onto my stoop every morning, here's an earnest eyewitness delivering his account directly to the listening audience.

Nevertheless, I don't invite him to sit at my table and tell me even more—for the same reasons that many people these days are not buying their local papers any more. Newspapers are in a business crisis (paid circulation declined 2.5 percent nationally in the past six months). Radio news has dimmed long ago on many commercial stations.

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What happened? In his fire report, the neighbor assumed a formal voice of an official reporter, and in that role, he'd declined—sorted through and eliminated, didn't even consider, perhaps—many crucial narratives that that he must have sensed, that flare into being right along with a fire. No sensory report of searing heat and acrid smoke. No haunted residents straggling out, no little girl looking in at her orange bedroom window, no casual, professional firemen, detached from the sorrow and making order of mayhem, lacking the fascinated gleam reflected in the eyes of some of the gathering onlookers, not including one guy in a bathrobe with a noisy dog pulling at him.

This report cautiously mistook enumeration for responsible portrayal, mistook ignoring emotional content for remaining objective, mistook selecting civic, not personal facts for being unbiased. So the account left out most of the story—systematically strained out the parts of available content most likely to engage the listener as a person, although it indeed included material listeners-as-citizens should hear about.

But there I was, in line at the coffee shop, heedlessly, inseparably, unitarily and indivisibly being all of me, both citizen interested in addresses and damage reports, and whole person, interested in people and human consequences. The reporter/neighbor's decision—which of course I set up in this tale to mimic conventional thinking about what constitutes news—is clearly no fun. And it's not great for business, at a time when papers and radio stations are desperately searching for audience, to toss out the engaging parts, as if engagingness is evidence of triviality and ethical irresponsibility.

Fire has social meaning as surely as civic meaning, and the heat of its personal meanings matches the heat of the blaze. No talk of the dispossessed? No wonder about firefighting? There's so much to say, a fine book to be written by someone willing to dissect the anatomy of a small urban blaze.

Still, the main reason I drank my coffee alone in this story is that the fellow's lapsing into standard newsvoice left me feeling lonely. The voice signals impersonality. He delivered some goods, sure. He even delivered the illusion of fair-mindedness. But he wasn't companionable. When I hear or read the news, I often feel officially constrained, kept back behind some cordon established for my own safety and the greater public good. Fine reporting, to the contrary, is a friend's generous act, leading the audience where it dares not traverse alone.

And fuller exploration of experience simply isn't possible in official newsvoice. That's the point of it. It is drained of the personality of the teller, and there's no one left, then, to sense, evaluate, and make the metaphors that explore what experience is like.

I have a term in my writing workshops for that sort of reporting. I call it sentinel reporting. Consider the names of newspapers: Bugle, Clarion, Patriot-Ledger, Sentinel, Tribune, Guardian. Sentinel reporting selects from the chaos of details about an event those elements that fit into a delimited 'civic fact set'—facts that affect city governance, the work of the city, the behavior of people as public citizens—addresses, fire brigade numbers, names of officials, damage amounts, medical conditions, official cause determination. It doesn't deal with quirky stuff, individual, moody stuff, not with peevishness, snits, depressions, triumphal,

gloating moments at work, happy seductions, innocent drunks, unshined shoes, smelly bathrooms, compulsive cleaning of same, doesn't acknowledge the excitement of a crowd at a fire—the stuff that fills our real lives, though not architects' glamorous drawings of it.

Insofar as such accounts deal with emotion at all, they confine themselves to the 'civic emotion set'—emotions shared by all citizens, basically, and given a multi-ethnic, multi-religious/agnostic, multi-class/multi-racial population, that emotion-set contains few elements: perhaps the civic emotion most commonly explored in the news is pity for endangered children—it's the emotion that most directly and effortlessly crosses tribal lines effortlessly. So does resentment of criminals. So does admiration of town benefactors. So does sports pride—and pride in the flag, although that's where even the few shared emotions start to get complicated.

It is no accident that there's a stiff way of uttering news, to which we're all habituated by years as listeners and readers. I'd start with a strong presumption that the reasons this is the voice of news must be multiple and strong, because it's counterintuitive that the most engaging, human-scale tales arising from public events are specifically not the traditional center of newsrooms' work. Rather, the mannered and restrictive presentations possible in 'newsvoice' represent the standard of what feels to sincere practitioners like ethical professionalism in news organizations across our nation, and world. Why? Perhaps because the diction of newsvoice tames and balances news by depersonalizing it, builds civic experience and civic unity—while still allowing open inspection of major social issues.

Still, in the light of the shrinkage of newspaper circulation, and the rise of narrative journalism as a way of retaining readers, it's worth asking this: if the events of a city's daily life offer up fascinating, thought-provoking tales, why must weak stories be favored by news media?

Disclosing news is a paradoxical activity. It surely seems useful to draw attention to shared danger and to congratulate unifying public events. But when we do so, we become official conveyors of these tidings, public functionaries. It's hard to avoid the becoming somehow official. And inside that role, it feels like an act of honor to strain out the irrelevant, the individual, the stuff that isn't in sum, community experience. This seems like the bias that propels us into the role of guardians, sentinels who watch the city for the public good. Our choosing newsvoice over quirkier, private voices reflects the (frequently instinctive) choice.

I hope we can explore and refine together here, an important idea for radio producers: that there are other voices available to you, appropriate to the act of sculpting a radio-listening experience for diverse audiences, than the standard sentinel voice. In fact, I'd like to suggest that many sorts of emotions and moods and activities and true pictures of our shared lives simply can't be portrayed in that standard voice.

And yet, if you flip through the day's presentations on public radio stations, or even scout the more individualistic ones aggregated so wonderfully on [www.prx.org](http://www.prx.org), most seem to have selected a voice, a diction, and thus a storyteller's stance, that's more conventional than the material and perspectives covered.

How much should and can you break from this conventional voice and still be part of a useful public conversation? How much is possible, given current expectations of editors and other gatekeepers? Can you offer examples of innovators who've explored other ways than this voice of presenting content? Is there a body of radio narrative that points to ways around the limitations of conventional voice? I'm not asking these questions with any pedagogical cunning. I ask as a radio outsider who's frequently marveled that public radio seems often in the forefront of such exploration.

I'll stop my presentation here. I hope I'm quitting in the middle of an exploration. It's the place where I surely need help, as I'm a visitor in this world, here by invitation and your tolerance—and very interested in the topic, in this time when the newsroom is melting away right along with the polar icecaps, and the nature of public news is up for rigorous exploration and redefinition.

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### **Jackson - November 25, 2006 - #3**

Circumstance determines content, content determines form. What's the best way of telling the story of Barbrie (aka Barbara) Allen? Answer: a ballad. Who's going to make that freight train come into the station on time? The alternating index and middle finger of Elizabeth Cotten, a left-handed guitarist.

One of the curious things in this modern era (regardless of media) is how we adapt what we need to talk about to the means we have to convey that message. I love the examples you offer -- the journalist slash neighbor in the coffee shop, deadpanning the delivery of the news. As a radio something-or-other, I know I have different voices -- of authority, of observation, of commentary. Who doesn't enjoy the ironical power of the flip of a tonsil?

My sense is that we are losing tracks of genres of expression. Ballads might have been the ultimate vehicle for describing the perils of the little missy in Aruba. Instead, we're faced with a truckload of hungry cameras without bait. And we don't know how to feed them. What do you think are the "forms" -- "genres", categories, morphologies -- of news telling? Which leads us into another pair of swamps: What distinguishes news from other forms of storytelling?

### **Mark Kramer - January 8, 2007 - #12**

Last thing first: \*News\* stories seem to me to be: a) not made up, b) of interest to the intended group, and c) probably, at least in the last incarnation of news, sorted through and shaped and delivered by a social body recognized as honest agents with a decipherable mission.

As we move into the digital age and business forms evolve, "a)" seems non-negotiable (made-up news (stories and otherwise) rots audience trust), "b)" seems subject to fragmentation, for better and for worse (digital broadcast in its various present and future forms can gather finely focused audiences, but will the communal bonding experience of sharing news that you suppose all other citizens are getting also survive?). As for "c)"--seems to me that independent, most reliable news in our culture centers around newspaper newsrooms, where a business model worked for a century and a half, in which a paid news staff supplied assuredly fairly-pure accounts, attracting readers to pages that also bore paid ads. That seems an awkward model that doesn't work for broadcast or web news. My crystal ball fogs over about here.

As for genres, at one level, narrative is about people doing things that accumulate, in the minds of audiences, into meaningful stories--and to the extent that story doesn't depend on a skilled narrator somehow using the specifics of a genre as part of the telling, a story is soup that can be served up in any vessel. But of course radio does song better, and TV does mime better than either genre comes through on paper. To the extent that informality of voice permeates many genres (look at the difference between today's 'Lonely Planet' guidebooks and 19th C. guidebooks!) that trend seems to flatten genre differences. So does the ease of including image and sound with text. But genres do have different expressive possibilities and aren't going to jumble into porridge.

### **Viki Merrick - November 26, 2006 - #4**

It's curious - I just posted on the current feature here on Transom- Street Fantasy - and asked the producer if hearing the reporter's inner voice makes the info more honest and/or but less reliable?

In spite of our emotional instincts, journalism used to be considered reliable because it was in the "sentinel" voice - no feelings to get in the way of the reporting...which as you point out makes life dull. I'm thinking about balance in this kind of personal voice. I have instinctively never trusted a report from Geraldo Rivera because he carried the first person voice and experience way over the top.

My ideal would be Michael Pollan who spoke in a genius manner about narrative voice at the Neiman Conference on Narrative Journalism, and he said something that stuck in my head.

Speaking in the first person doesn't mean you know me. You know what I choose to reveal of me: (and his list was exemplary so I'll repeat his) Son? Father? Jew? Carnivore? He doesn't slobber all over the subject with a big I, I, I, - but as an ignorant carnivore with a baby steer at stake - he told a story that changed my daily life - in one day. Unless I'm drunk at a bbq or irrationally famished, I try never to eat corn-fed beef - (and at the very least, no antibiotics etc.) Pretty powerful right? Informs a lot of other things in my life besides my hamburger.

Was the reporting reliable AND true AND honest? Absolutely - because Pollan the Omnivore was driven to know too - and his mission becomes ours. He told a story but with a lot of news in it: Steer ain't supposed to be eatin' corn and SIDEBAR: corn turns out to be mixed up with a lot of things it shouldn't....! So this kind of 1st person narrative voice works in all ways. And it's reliable because it begins from a place of ignorance... and a tenacious determination to know.

But now I'm wondering about this other kind of 1st person voice. You have to cover a news story in a Psychiatric ward - which makes you, as a first person, - PHOBIC - and by the way, your Father, no, your Mother was a Psychiatrist. Should I be psycho-phobic daughter of a Psychiatrist or not? Hindrance or Enhancement? And more importantly, and more complicated, based on the decision, am I portraying **A** truth or **The** honest truth?

### Mark Kramer - January 8, 2007 - #13

Fascinating comment. First thing I thought of were Wallace Stevens' lines from Peter Quince: "Just as my fingers on these keys Make music, so the self-same sounds On my spirit make a music, too. Music is feeling, then, not sound;..."

Is the newshound, picking out the crucial facts for a good story, playing feelings, too, not sound? Your wise question (unanswerable, of course), "am I portraying \*A\* truth or \*THE\* honest truth?" is revealing.

On the one hand, to modern eyes, it sounds naive to claim that some 'objective' version of a news story exists that's of special use to readers who live in a city and reasonably wish to know what important stuff happened today--

--because a dump of all measurable (that's the closest I can come to 'objective') facts about an event would scarcely replicate the event,

--because the mere selection of facts unavoidably involves bias,

--and because the most lifelike descriptions of salient facts must include emotional data, nuanced, various, and transferable to audiences only as simile (What's she LIKE?).

Does this assertion (Nonfiction Writer Denies Objectivity!) reframe newsroom industriousness? Does it seemingly insult great daily reporting as the mere pursuit of partial lists of what may have happened.

That's not what I meant at all.

I think we socialized human beings have learned to operate in most of the hours of our lives mainly as community members, and we mostly share enough of a sense of what's good for our place (and for us) and bad for it (and for us) so that what I've called "sentinel news" is of crucial, delightful use, that such stories indeed make us safer, inform us about what needs cooperative fixing and what's up for our appreciation.

These days, because we all have learned (from TV soap operas?) that backstories that acknowledge a nasty subset of anti-civic human traits frequently explain a lot about what happens, mixing narrative with older-style news stories improves public comprehension.

But there is an imposed limit--and Viki's question points to it.

One can move past this limit, and portray the mundane accurately, by strangely, idiosyncratically, admitting and using, as writers, parts of ourselves that frame the world oddly.

To the extent that voiced-voiced news inhibits full, fair, political understanding or hugs the status-quo, it isn't any longer a sufficient voice for news.

On the other hand, no one seems to want to turn the front page or radio or TV news hour into an avant garde literary magazine. The topics that narrative journalists have added to newspapers mostly are mawkish ones (Surgeon Helps Disfigured Kid, Twins Separated By Oceans and Cultures Reunited, Fireman Hero Back at Work With Artificial Leg) that stick to that 'civic emotion set'--more than they must, even, but that's where they are.

In spite of the looming heresy that comes with the rise of storytelling in newsrooms, bringing reporters ever nearer acknowledging the disturbing illusiveness of objectivity, actual storytelling in news media has pretty much stayed confined to civic uses. There's space for idiosyncratic, non-community-binding-but-true tales in books, literary mags, and poetry slams.

When we tell stories socially, at a barroom table, we size up the crowd. Old, close, value-sharing friends get the weird version. Add some others to the crowd, a priest, a person of another level of education, someone from another culture, and the story transforms to match the common denominator. News broadcasts and newspapers are usually made for such compound demographics and make those adjustments.

My editorial inclination is to resist mawkishness, even for such compound audiences-- though it tempts, as a way for a reporter to satisfy a feeling that reaching for everyone in the audience is a civic duty.

It's good to let the detailed circumstances tell the writer a story's meaning, so the writer needn't impose a moralistic or loyal civic meaning.

Still, at some point, the gradient of that truth-telling license in news media might get steep enough to slide a story out of public usefulness. News media are businesses, with editors paid to see that content echoes mission: Is [whatever] good or bad for the community?

There's a lot of room to tell stories, but not absolute freedom. Nonfiction narrative \*books\* can be less orthodox than newspaper or magazine pieces and still get published.

The press (can you call radio news 'the press'?) marries fact-seeking and business considerations. That's practical, if not always noble.

In the day-to-day world of news writing, the colorful flowering of all those odd truths that narrative nonfiction invites in theory turns out to be duller in practice. And meanwhile, news media that accept the expansion of news reporting to include storytelling (of this somewhat constrained sort) find that it does work harmoniously with straight news. Readers and viewers enjoy the mix.

Meanwhile, Diogenes wanders offstage and down a side street, lantern held high, chasing a real, quirky story that may never get published . . .

#### **Nubar - November 27, 2006 - #5**

When I talk about photography, especially when I'm talking with photographers who are looking for their own way of seeing, I don't use the term "personal vision." Instead I talk about "finding your own voice." This seems to be an easier way into the process for most people.

We are all born with our own voice. It always sounds like us, even on the phone. Yes. We are born with our own eyes. But how we see is informed and influenced by what we encounter in the world and, of course, where we come from. So it seems that "voice" is key to finding "vision" and I wonder, Mark, if you could comment on this. Does this make sense in the narrative world you live/work in?

#### **Viki Merrick - December 4, 2006 - #9**

I think voice and vision, if we're blessed with both, metaphorically and otherwise, are somewhat interchangeable or at the very least synergistic. "Voice" gives body to vision; but with no real vision, you may have nothing to say. Vision is the seeing INTO things and I suppose, making a narrative of what you see in words or sounds or pictures.

It's childish I know, but I love examples (especially in photography) of how one subject, is interpreted by two or three or five different people. It makes you proud to be a member of the species.

A good example of this has been working with someone on an essay (for This I Believe) and then Nubar goes to take the portrait after reading the essay. I can say with jumping UP and DOWN delight that Nubar's vision often framed something that was there, but quiet to me, while other times it played the same chord that had been playing in my head. This wasn't just the satisfaction of SEEING the face previously unknown or not, it was not that revelation. Certainly Norman Corwin's portrait is a heart wrenching example of what I mean - his belief in kindness is so relevant in the portrait that I get a lump in my throat when I look at it, as I did listening to his essay. The polarity in Dr. Jamison's life and work is perfectly revealed in choosing to portray her with her hair covering one eye.

But expression of voice and vision doesn't just come - first it has to be perceived and that means EARS. Reaching true voice and honest vision, I believe, requires listening first. Listening is being open to what's playing out before you. Then there is listening to one's own "voice" which is what informs the vision.

#### **Mark Kramer - January 9, 2007 - #14**

In my world of written narrative, voice is also absolutely key, and finding (and asserting!) 'your voice' is the open sesame to rich pieces. The reasons why stack up pretty convincingly.

First, let me define 'voice'--from an audience-member's perspective. VOICE is a reader/listener/viewer's sense of the personality of the teller.

Even standard newsvoice ('a fire yesterday at the corner of third and elm destroyed . . .' etc.) is an invention that reflects this definition. It offers NO CLUES TO INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY, and that's the point. It converts 'us' into 'citizens' by denying [that] anything personal [is] coming in. Only shared human traits that consent to civic norms enter into the exchange. And of course its explanatory powers are partial, and the experience of a real-live full personality consenting to the act of reading text only in citizen-mind is normal but seldom delightful, and as my essay above demonstrates, even the fact-set that's expressible in this voice is incomplete.

At the far other extreme, I suppose, is a tell-all voice--its subtext is, dear pal, we're best friends, or even better, you're my shrink, mother, priest, co-believer. It's a pretense of some successful fiction, but good lord, you no more want to read a piece in this voice (nor would trust the observations offered in it) than you would want to find yourself on a long plane trip, seated next to someone who commences their own story in this voice.

There's no single rule, but the most successful common practice is to construct a personable public voice, one that shows aloofness from public influence, shows wisdom and toughness and moderation and geniality and plenty of savvy about worldly issues, shows that there's a real person with a whole sensibility, none of it stored for the duration, chatting with you. In short, it's the sort of voice you might be delighted to hear at eleven p.m., at a dinner party of fairly good friends and their friends, starting to tell an anecdote about a trip taken, stranger encountered, mishap endured. It's polite, kindly, and informed. But it's also public. Not inappropriately intimate or presumptuous, or even imposing of biases or beliefs upon the listener.

I sometimes say to my classes that it's a voice that touches you--but on your legally touchable area--like someone next to you at a dinner party who lays fingertips on your forearm to let you know something delicious is being passed your way, not like someone who pulls a morsel off the platter and stuffs it into your mouth, setting off your alarm bells, not your gusto to have some.

Does it include first-person pronouns? It needn't. Tracy Kidder's first four books, including *Soul of a New Machine*, *House*, *Among Schoolchildren*..., are written in 'strong voice' but

there's not an 'I' or 'me' between the covers. Yet any reader might finish and think, 'Boy, that writer was fun to hang out with.' Personality is in the word choices and topic choices and tactics of expression, not in the first-person pronouns. But in his latest book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* there \*is\* first person--because at some level the book is about Kidder's figuring out something new about his own altruistic impulses and ways of relating to an admirable person. Unless the topic is personal, it's rarely needed. But 'strong voice' is.

The reason is structural. A strong voiced narrator's companionability opens up structural choices. If you went to a museum with a boring, official guide, you'd plod along, this painting, this painting, this painting, zzzzz. But if you went with a brilliant and playful art historian/friend, she might say, hey, look at this painting here, now let's run upstairs...keep the smile from that first painting in mind...here, in the corner, see this other smile? Okay, store that away, and now I'm going to show you three cityscapes, but keep those smiles in mind, and then I'm going to ask you a question...etc., and because you trust and appreciate the savvy of your guide, you delight in the experience of accepting a directed, bumpy structure that actually \*leads somewhere.\*

And a delightful and adventurous structure that holds interest and leads somewhere depends on strong voice.

That's the voice that takes some finding, and indeed, enables the transmission of vision, even if it isn't, itself, the source of vision.

**Jay Allison - Feb 5, 2007 - #15**

thank you...

Great thanks to Mark Kramer for taking the time to be with us--especially amid overseas travel, the Nieman Conference, deadlines, and everything else--to share these provocative thoughts on Voice.

If you want more of this Kramer-inspired discussion of narrative, I recommend you check out the new book he edited with Wendy Call, titled **Telling True Stories** and containing practical counsel from Tom Wolfe, Nora Ephron, Gay Talese, Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Orlean and a whole crowd of wise writers and editors. It's filled with good advice.