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The Unreliable Narrator, or the Difference Between Writing Prose in Literature and in Social Science

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The unreliable narrator, or the difference between writing prose in literature and in social science: A commentary on Tierney's article

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Tierney is right — the writing in qualitative research is important. In his very well-written essay, Tierney decries the boring writing in the social science field, even in supposedly "alternative" texts, and calls for models from fiction. Let me be a little playful and metaphorical here by using an example of how experience is turned into fiction. The metaphor has to do with rescue. Perhaps a small suggestion about genre can "rescue" this discussion.

Many years ago, my then husband and I were fishing on Lake Erie when one of those famous Lake Erie storms suddenly blew up. Lake Erie is shallow, like a saucer, and when the winds come, 12-foot waves can rise. Small craft, beware. We slowly made our way toward shore, our 19-foot fiberglass fishing boat (with center console so you could walk around the whole boat with a fishing pole), bashing and twisting in the dark wind and water.

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Their boat was being socked on the bow as they hit each wave. They braced themselves with their knees and hips against the console. The situation was tenuous. Again and again they rose on a wave and fell into a trough, rise and fall, rise and fall, as the water splashed, mercilessly irregular. When the boat dropped, it seemed as if the cushion of water gave way and they were going to go straight under.

"We're going to drown, we're going to, we're going, we're going to drown!" Kathy put a life jacket on and handed one to Sarah, tossing and twisting as she struggled to keep her footing. She was hit by a panic so deep she wanted to scream her head off, to throw herself overboard and be done with it, to dance like a banshee. "We're ditching. We're going to ditch!" She pulled Sarah's arm from the wheel and the wheel spun rapidly as the boat careened and began to take a header into another wave.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Sarah pushed Kathy off with one shoulder, like a football player, and grabbed the wheel back with her other arm. Kathy fell over the swivel seat and onto the deck.

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About a mile from shore we saw some heads in the water. A strong man, my husband was gripping the wheel with both hands, and I had my knees jammed against the console and my hands on the console grips. To say we were scared would be an understatement. Flights of panic churned within my chest as we heaved and dropped, heaved and dropped.

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Kathy took the wheel and they slowly chugged, up and down the waves, inching steadily toward safety. Yet the panic stayed, her heart clutched in on itself, her breath almost stopped. She could barely see, barely breathe.

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Then, in the gray churn of water, rain, and waves, we saw a small boat that had been swamped and we slowly picked our way toward them.

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The seas were high, but she fought them with all the strength in her forearms, holding the wheel steady, pointing the bow to the river mouth just over the horizon. Sarah had her back to Kathy, looking towards shore, too. Then, "Look!" Sarah pointed. Just below the horizon they saw the neon pink of the international distress flag, a small patch in the gray of the water and the lighter gray of the sky. It was being waved, so far as they could see with the waves so high, by a figure standing up in a small boat that intermittently appeared and disappeared according to how their bobbings were synchronized.

"Someone's in the water! There's three heads!" Sarah pointed again.

Kathy automatically swung the boat towards them. Her panic no longer selfish, subsided. There was a small outboard with four large men — overloaded — circling three bobbing balls in the water. One of the men was standing up in the small boat, waving the distress flag spread between his upraised arms. Kathy remembered the old warning. She had said it to her kids over and over, and to the kids she used to counsel at summer camp. Never stand up in a canoe. She shouted, "Never stand up in a canoe!" Fortunately her words went the way of the wind and of the water.

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We lived in Bowling Green, about 60 miles away, and as we drove home, I sat with my legs propped up on our Chevy van's window, barely able to talk for thought of the fear that we had faced. "Thinking about writing a poem about it, aren't you?" he said. "Yes," I said. "It's a story, though. Not a poem." When we got home we were exhausted and amazed that we had actually performed the rescue and that it was only 4 p.m. We told the kids we needed a nap, and went to our bedroom. Within a half hour I was downstairs in the study, typing on my electric typewriter, getting the emotional and physical details down. I knew I would probably want to use it some time in a short story or in a novel, as I was a fiction writer.

The story of the rescue became transmogrified when I finally wrote it and integrated the action of the rescue, combining that story with another story that had appeared in the newspapers, about a cabin cruiser cut in half by a cable being drawn by a barge pulling another barge. I called it "Fish Scram," and it was about two women, who had supposedly survived an incident like the barge incident, re-entering the water of Lake Erie — metaphorically climbing back on the horse — and performing a rescue that healed them. Imagination was key here: "Liberty of imagination should be the most precious possession of a novelist," said Joseph Conrad (1948). Perhaps a discussion of the uses of imagination in social science could also be appropriate here, but that is not the province of Tierney's essay.

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The smaller boat was lurching on the waves, having more trouble than their deep-hulled 19-footer. The man with the tiller was having trouble trying to keep it steady. The three people in the water were clinging to the bow of a turquoise boat that had sunk, stern down, into the water. As they neared, they made out two men and a woman. The two men had the woman sort of propped upon their shoulders, clinging higher on the bow of the sinking boat, while they tried to boost her up there
and still keep from swallowing water themselves. Kathy passed too close and the boat's wake sloshed water in their faces.

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In “Fish Scream,” I chose to use the third-person limited point of view, the point of view where the narrator is in the mind of only one of the characters – Kathy. This is a more respectable – or trustworthy – point of view than the omniscient point of view, where the narrator is in the minds of many, or all, of the characters. But choosing the third-person limited point of view is still problematic when one is talking about using it in social science research representation.

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She widened her circling. Then she approached them, very slowly so she wouldn't splash, cutting the motor as they got near. Sarah had moved to the bow of the boat and she threw a lifeline to one of the men. He didn't catch it, and almost lost his grip on the sunken boat, in the try. Kathy backed out a little and came in again. Sarah threw again. Kathy cut the motor; dead sound. Only the weather. The man caught the line. He was wearing a brown leather jacket, like a German pilot, and he had a gray face.

Kathy left the wheel and stumbled a little, to the bow alongside Sarah. The men in the water said, “Get Ruby! She can't swim!”

Ruby looked up at the height of the bow at the women leaning over toward her. “I can't make it, it's too high.”

They are all so calm.

“Sure you can,” Kathy said. “Give me your hand.” She reached down off the bow and grabbed Ruby around the wrist in the lifesaving grip. But Ruby was no lightweight. She was hefty, in her fifties or sixties, flabby, not agile. Together the men in the water tried to push her up further, on their shoulders, towards Kathy, as Kathy pulled on her arm. Then Sarah leaned over the very front side of the bow, yelling, “Lift your leg, Ruby! Lift your leg!” Kathy pulled on the arm and Sarah pulled on the leg and somehow they lifted Ruby sideways up enough, so they could reach the elastic waistband of her plaid stretch pants.

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The true mark of an amateur fiction writer is the use of the omniscient point of view, I was told by my professors when I was studying fiction writing. Tierney seems to agree, but I am confused about whether he is using the term not as technically as I am, as the omniscient point of view is the one used in most best-selling novels. Our students are more likely to model their writing after these than after the experimental and literary novels Tierney and I love.

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“I can't! I can't do it!” Ruby was crying.

“I can't!”

“Ruby, you can.” Kathy noticed that her voice was strong and calm. “Now come on. Lift your leg against the boat.”

Sarah. Speaking in her calm voice, “I've got you, Ruby. She's got you. C'mon, Ruby. Try!”

Finally the two women, finding strength in their arms and legs that they didn't know they had, rolled Ruby – slung her really – over the rail onto the raised deck, and there she lay, panting and spitting, in a heap, collapsed onto the tangled boat cover. Sarah fussed over her, murmuring, “It's all right. You're safe. It's all right. We've got you.” Ruby nodded, dumb and spent.

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Each point of view has its strengths and characteristics. First-person point of view has problems with the question of artistic distance, and of reader trust, but its immediacy makes for a good read. Few people write in the second person, but this point of view is also interesting and challenging and the story changes subtly when the narrator uses "you." The fiction writer uses point of view to tell a story, which is, ideally, more subtly true than the naked truth. When I was studying and practicing my scales in fiction writing, I set myself a task to write and publish a story in every point of view. To prove my professors wrong, I wrote a whole novel in the omniscient point of view (Piirto, 1985). Of course the tone of the story was omniscient also, the distance being that of the fairy tale. The fairy tale enters every character's mind with equanimity.

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Now for the men. The boat was bucking. The waves seemed larger. The two men clung to the bow of their sinking 16-footer. The small motorboat was still circling the scene, four large men helpless in a small craft. Kathy was conscious of their will and energy as they watched her and Sarah perform the rescue.

"Come to the stern," Kathy said to the man in the brown jacket, who was still clutching the lifeline. It was twisted into his hand, around it tight. His arm must have been pulled out of its socket by now. "It'll be easier to get you up from down at the stern," Sarah said. Kathy returned to the wheel to steady the boat.

Sarah reached for his hand as the boat bobbed. She braced her knees against the inside rail of the boat and said, "Come down here with me, along the rail. I've got you. You're safe." She gripped his hand in the firm grip they'd used on Ruby.

He looked up at Sarah as if he didn't believe he could make it. He told her, "I'm all right, now you've got Ruby."

"Come on, Sarah said, and Kathy could see her fix her eyes on the man's eyes, though she couldn't see the man. It was the same pity as for the screaming fish.

"Come on, you can do it. I'll guide you down to the stern and we'll both help you up. She pulled him up so that he could get his other hand around the rail, and Kathy could see his blue-white fingers curl around, and grip it.

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In "Fish Scream," I manipulated an incident that had happened to me, changed the voice, chose characters, chose a point of view, set up a dramatic situation in which the characters would be tried and tested, and changed the purpose. The key word is drive. In fiction one can drive the prose to an emotional conclusion. One is not held to factual truth telling, but the author can manipulate the story and the narrator, through the technique of point of view, tries to tell the greater story in the most appropriate voice. Aristotle devotes a whole section of the Poetics to this, the telling of the higher truth through artifice. Aristotle (1952) spoke of the difference between social studies (history) and literature (art), in a way that may still be applicable to the present discussion: "Hence poetry [or art] is something more philosophic and of graver import than history [or social science], since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars."

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"I don't have a life jacket," the man whispered as he dangled off the motor end of the boat, his eyes still on Sarah's as if he is confusing his deepest secret. Kathy read his lips. "And I've taken a lot of water. Bless you. Bless you."
Kathy moved to the stern to help them, and saw, as if in a tableau, Sarah’s eyes locked on the man’s eyes, Sarah willing him to be rescued, her lips moving as if saying a prayer, in quiet words of encouragement. They were as intense as lovers. As they passed the lifejacket compartment, Sarah reached backward, still keeping him with her eyes, and pulled a jacket out. She reached down to put it around his neck, but she couldn’t reach low enough to hook it. She tied it, one-handed, and almost went over the rail as a wave hit them broadside. But she regained her footing, bending her knees and pressing them against the inside of the rail, and she led him, inched him, down the side of the boat and around to the motor, where Kathy waited. Kathy knew then that Sarah needed for the man to be rescued as much for herself as for the man.

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In my short story, I crafted dialogue, pace, and dramatic incident. Tierney calls for better and more interesting writing from social scientist ethnographers, and assigns his students novels and short stories to read. I assign creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction operates under the supposition that the narrator is similar to the author, and the author is reporting, or telling the truth as he or she has found it. It is creative nonfiction for which a qualitative researcher in the social sciences describing his or her data should aim. For example, I assign a physical description of the work place and ask my students to model their writing on that of Tracy Kidder in Among Schoolchildren (1989). Some even buy the book on tape and listen to the whole book while commuting, or exercising, getting the kind of writing I want them to do into their brains and instincts. I assign them to read an excerpt from Annie Dillard’s work, An American Childhood (1987), or from Selma, Lord Selma (Sikora, 1979) as they write about a school ritual from the point of view of the administrator or from the point of view of an outside observer. I give a brief lecture on authorial point of view.

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The man in the brown jacket seemed reassured at having a lifejacket, as if he believed in rescue. “Bless you, bless you,” he kept on saying. Kathy pulled on one arm and Sarah on the other. He placed his foot on the blade of the big motor and somehow they hoisted him over the back end and flopped him between them onto the seat, over the bilge well.

“Are you all right?” Kathy asked. The man was lying over the seat, and Sarah helped him up to a sitting position. “Yes. I’m fine. Fine. Where’s Ruby?”

“She’s fine, too. Up in front,” Sarah said. Ruby did not look fine, though. She was lying quite still, and still panting. Kathy and Sarah looked at each other. Stroke? Heart attack? None of these people looked in particularly good physical shape, Ruby especially. Sarah quickly made her way along the rail and sat Ruby up, swaddling her with the canvas boat cover. “This’ll have to do until we get to shore. We don’t have a blanket. Are you all right? Ruby nodded, but her face was blue and purple and white.

“Get my buddy. Get my buddy,” the man said to Kathy.

“We are,” Kathy said. By now they had drifted quite a way from the man in the orange lifejacket clinging to the bobbing bow of the submerged turquoise boat. The bow was only two and a half feet above the water. It seemed to be sinking faster.

Kathy circled him again, and approached from the downwind side, cutting the motor as before. Sarah threw him the rope, but he didn’t even try for it; he was clinging to the bow with both arms, with all his might. His face was white with fear.

Kathy had to circle again, and they drifted right next to him, approaching with the wind. Sarah threw him the rope again. “Cut the motor!” She reached over the bow to throw the line, and this time he relinquished his clinging to the sinking boat and caught the rope. Sarah pulled him in, though he
was reluctant to leave the bow of his boat. "Now I'm going to lead you down the length of the boat to the back. It's easier to get in back there."

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Any week's issue of the New Yorker, any month's issue of Harper's or The Atlantic Monthly, contains fine examples of research that people who are prose writers have done and that has been written about. One would not call these literature, perhaps, but journalism. Still, research has been done, and the stories are written in an interesting manner. Scholarly attribution can be done as I am doing with this essay, through notes and references. A section on methodology can be added without interfering with validity concerns. What Tierney is asking is not difficult; perhaps it is only difficult for the keepers of the gate, those tenured professors in elite universities to whom we all look up and after whom we model our writing. Perhaps a temporary ban on first-person point of view and extended discussions about point of view may ameliorate the concerns of narcissism that Tierney addresses.

I keep trying to break through domains, using the literary to illuminate the social science (and vice versa) as I am doing in this essay. I recently submitted an article in the creative nonfiction style, to a scholarly educational psychology journal. It concerned my observations at a school in India (Piirto, 2002b). When I received it back, one reviewer said, "This isn't research!" Then another reviewer contacted me and asked permission to use the article in his qualitative research class. The editor refused the article unless I would add a section on methodology, so I did. I wrote 1,120 more words discussing constructionism, phenomenology, portraiture, and the like, with copious references to various qualitative methodologists. Without this section, the article was a creative nonfiction piece, written with all the skill I could muster, and it could be submitted to literary journals as well. The methodology section calmed the first reviewer, who said, in the second go-around, "Now, that's more like it!"

Having taught a course called The Art of Fiction in my first incarnation as a college professor— in an English department at a university— I know I will not have the time during the qualitative research course to teach them how to write fiction. I also know that my graduate students in educational administration are, for the most part, not great fiction readers, and I do not encourage them to try to write fiction, for it is holy to me, and takes a lot of preparation. I myself have written three novels (two unpublished), many short stories (ten unpublished), and a lot of creative nonfiction (two unpublished books), and I feel amateur.

However, some of my graduate students are readers, and they do read journalism and nonfiction in magazines and books. I think that the model of good writing given by creative nonfiction writers and journalists is a good one for my students to follow, and I think we can encourage our students to free themselves to write in the "new journalism" styles. One of the journals of creative nonfiction, River Teeth, is based here on our campus. This and other literary journals have myriad examples of writing nonfiction using fictional techniques, and when given permission graduate students can practice modeling their own writing after some of this good work. Let's just face it. Good writing is good writing. Our eyes follow, our brains absorb, and we are moved as the story unfolds.

I agree with Tierney's concerns about the Other, the Subject and Subjectivities, and the like, for such often seem to be droning on and on while contemplating one's navel. Of course one writes about others whom one has observed. Of course one cannot tell that person's truth but only make an honest attempt using all the writing
skills one has. Of course one is subjective. Of course the person will never be portrayed fully. Those are social science givens. Just accept them and try to be honest. The reader will forgive you if you write it well and honestly. It’s a dirty little secret, but we all are guilty of “Othering.” We can only be aware of it and try our best.

Susan Richards Shreve tells about a recent novel she published under a pseudonym. The reason she used a pseudonym was that the narrator was a black woman and Shreve is a white woman and her editor told her not to dare to publish the book because she as a white woman would be in political trouble, and would be accused of appropriating a black woman’s story. Shreve, being a fiction writer, used the time-honored custom of publishing the novel with another publisher, in another name. The novel was published to reviews by African-American critics and placed in the African-American sections of bookstores (Shreve, 2001).

To take on a pseudonym is something I have also done, as a fiction writer, but this practice would not be accepted in social science, because of the social contract that assumes that the writer of the story, the teller of the data, is who her name says she is. This attributional dilemma is only one of the pitfalls of taking fiction as a model for social science writing.

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“You’re all right, you’re going to be all right,” Sarah said as she led the man back. Together Kathy and Sarah and the man in the brown jacket tried to lift the man in the water into the boat, but the motor was turned too much for him to have enough space.

“Turn the wheel! Turn the motor!” Sarah moved quickly back to the console, and turned the wheel, but it was already taut. “Turn the goddamn wheel!” Kathy wondered at Sarah’s slowness.

“I am, goddamn it, I am!”

“The wrong damn way!” Kathy leaped back to turn it the other way. The motor straightened out and they pulled the man in. She sat him next to his friend, and as they set out to get them to shore and to help, he waved back at his sinking boat and said, “Goodbye, Starcraft.”

The four men in their small outboard rode alongside them for a while, and then Kathy gunned the motor and passed them. Sarah waved back to their salute. The waves were smaller now, and the rain was cold and steady, so the trip back was an easy one.

Later, over beers in the marina, Sarah told Kathy, “You know the guy in the jacket? He told me he’d been rescued once before, in the North Sea, during World War II, in December 1943, when his boat was hit by a sub.”

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The social contract one enters into when one writes from a stance within the social science domain goes something like this: The researcher has conducted his or her study using the implicit and explicit guidelines set out in the domain – interview, observations, and documents. He or she has coded the data, using a process of selection and winnowing that has been suggested by thinkers in the field. Then, in the description of the data and what they show, the researcher – and this is the hard part – contracts with the reader of the study, to tell the truth. Not to lie. Not to fabricate. Not to plagiarize. Not to combine characters for purposes of a higher truth. Not to be, as they say in the fiction world, an unreliable narrator.

As you are reading this story, are you trusting Kathy to tell you the truth as she sees it? Can you decipher hers and Sarah’s epiphany (a necessary part of any fictional short story but probably not necessary in a creative nonfiction essay)? When the reader cannot trust the narrator of a story the reader falls on quicksand, shifting ground. The reader must analyze. The reader must criticize. The reader must
inductively shift stances in order to capture the message of the story, must work very, very hard in order to come up with any meaning.

Of course, say postpositivists and postmodernists, all narrators are unreliable in the sense that there is no absolute truth, only relative truth, and one hopes the author chooses the narrator to tell the truth as he or she has, at the moment of writing the story, tended to see it. Unless the readers, the audience, are trained to cast their brains on the reliability of the story’s narrator, there is no deductive logic; there is only inductive fumbling toward propositions, islands of truth within the stormy seas of data. Playing with narratorial point of view is part of the fun of writing and reading fiction. But the reader of a qualitative study has rights, also, within the relationship between researcher (or writer) and reader, between teller and told-to. These are the right to read good writing; to read a good story; to trust the narrator not to be solipsistic, narcissistic, or, in the case of a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, inexperienced in the genre in which the story is told.

That social science researchers who have not studied, and in many cases, do not even choose to read exemplars from poetry, from drama, from novels, from short stories – or, most appropriately, from creative nonfiction or journalism – would say, “Oh, I just think I’ll change a few names and make a composite character and tell this as a novel,” is surprising to me. Borrowing the techniques is one thing. Yes, do borrow. Practice. We all want a good read. Writing is never finished and each story can be told in many ways. But to have the hubris to say one can, without study, without preparation, without any background in the art of fiction, write in that art is another kettle of fish (scream).

The fiction writers we read have studied literature. In a recent qualitative study, I looked at themes in the lives of 160 contemporary U.S. writers, 80 men and 80 women (Piirto, 2002a). These are writers who qualify for listing in the Directory of American Poets & Writers.3 In order to qualify, a writer must have 12 points of accumulated credit, with the following as means of qualification: one published poem counts as one point; a novel counts as 12 points, a book of published poetry counts as 12 points, and an established literary award counts as 4 points. In 1993–94 there were 4,113 poets, 1,806 fiction writers, and 1,041 combination poets and fiction writers listed. Of these writers, all had a background in English literature. Almost all had studied fiction writing, creative nonfiction writing, drama writing, or poetry writing in an academic setting. Almost all had MA, MFA or PhD degrees and because most writers are unable to support themselves by writing, they are based in English departments in universities (it is only because of the vagaries of life that I as a writer am based in an education department and not an English department).

As a person straddling both fields, I would think twice of writing up qualitative data as fiction. Fiction is too difficult. It’s much easier to write it straightforwardly, using all the writing skills I possess. In other words, it takes a lot of hard work to be a published prose writer, dramatist, or poet. However, I try to write up my research as creative nonfiction. This to me does not violate the social contract regarding trust in narrators.

It is perhaps cavalier to think that we can teach our graduate students in qualitative research to present their research as fiction without them already having studied scene, story, plot, impetus, structure, point of view, tone, voice, rhythm, rhyme, diction, time-shifts, characters (flat, round, real, unreal), character development, dialogue, angle of telling (or of repetition, as Stegner put it [Stegner, 2000]), relevance, and style. We receive knowledge of these in a certain osmotic way, through reading,
but it helps to be taught to focus on these elements of story as well. I know I do not
have time to do this in my qualitative research course. One cannot learn to write
fiction in a few short weeks. But, as Tierney asserts, we should encourage qualitative
researchers to read exemplary prose, to imitate, and to practice their writing. I submit
they should also choose reliable narrators when they write it down.

Notes
Writers Category. Judge: Carol By.

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