

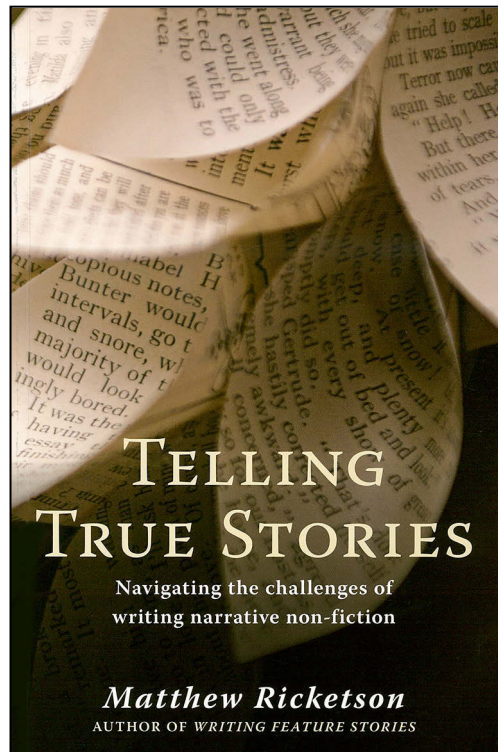
Searching for the truth of book-length journalism

DR BONITA MASON is a journalism lecturer at Curtin University in Western Australia.

Telling True Stories: Navigating the challenges of writing narrative non-fiction, by Matthew Ricketson. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014. 282pp. ISBN 978-1-742379-35-7

AUSTRALIAN journalism academic and practitioner Matthew Ricketson's new book opens with two quotes: one from South African writer Nadine Gordimer on the enduring presence of 'beauty' in the quest for truth; the other from US comparative literature professor Peter Brooks on the impossibility of separating our own humanity and imaginations from what we write. Gordimer has also written elsewhere of the writer's responsibility, as a social being, to take part in their world through their writing—to become 'more than a writer' (1985, p. 141). The kind of writing Ricketson seeks to define, and describes, analyses and advocates in this book (much of which is also investigative), comes closest to meeting these roles and responsibilities for the non-fiction writer.

As a young journalist, Ricketson covered the Ash Wednesday bush fires in 1980s Victoria. He was struck by the gulf between what his short news reports could convey and the enormity of the fires and people's



experiences of them. Years later, as he began studying and teaching journalism, Ricketson discovered 'just how supple and enlivening are the various forms of journalism' (p. 4). He has been writing and studying long-form journalism for a long time—a commitment and breadth of work evident in the pages of this book.

Ricketson begins *Telling True Stories*, as many of us do in journalism research and writing, by establishing the human, political and democratic importance of long-form journalism, and with problems of definition. He notes the inadequacy of the term 'non-fiction', explores the alternatives and settles on 'true stories' (see Chapter 2)—a category of writing that has been variously identified as literary journalism, long-form

journalism, narrative journalism, reportage, creative non-fiction and literary non-fiction. In this book, Ricketson contributes to the knowledge and understanding of an important form of journalism practice and production relatively neglected by scholarly research. He also advocates the recognition of book-length journalism within the journalism field, and as a reading, writing and publishing genre alongside other works of non-fiction, such as true crime, history and biography.

However it is labelled and whatever form it takes in print or online, for Ricketson, a true story is book-length work demonstrating journalistic research methods and a narrative style of writing for a broad audience (p. 29). Beyond news and distinct from the novel, but somewhere along a continuum between the two, a true story offers 'fresh information, more information, information set in context and information whose meaning has been mined and shaped into a narrative that fully engages readers' minds and emotions' (p. 39).

Such engaging writing may act more powerfully on story subjects, sources and readers, and on the journalist themselves, than either news or fiction and therefore magnifies the potential ethical problems that arise from its practices. This understanding, and Ricketson's belief in the power of true stories to contribute to democratic conversations, underpins the strong and consistent ethical thread running through the core of this book.

Telling True Stories provides an analysis of many (and many well-known) works of book-length journalism, and presents

that analysis within the context of scholarly and interview material from academics and practitioners who have studied and practised aspects of it, including its methods and representation. Ricketson focuses his analysis and discussion on books, mostly from North America and Australia. He examines various works and practices from Bob Woodward, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Gitta Sereny's *Cries Unheard: The Story of Mary Bell*, Helen Garner's *The First Stone*, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson's *Dark Victory*, John Bryson's *Evil Angels* and Margaret Simons's *The Meeting of the Waters*, among others. He examines these texts for what they offer our understanding of book-length journalism and for their lessons in ethical practice. His ambitions are scholarly and practical. *Telling True Stories* contributes to our understanding of the form, and is both a caution and guide for writers and readers of book-length journalism.

The book is structured according to the three phases of the book-length journalism production process: research, including journalist-source relationships (chapters 3, 4 and 5); writing, including similarities and differences between fiction and non-fiction and authorial voice (chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10); and reception, which focuses on cultivating 'informed trust' in the reader (chapters 11 and 12). This categorisation is rough and aspects of research, writing and reception necessarily weave their way in and out of most if not all of the chapters.

In the research chapters, Ricketson focuses most keenly on ethical concerns in

the journalist-source relationship that are present in all forms of journalism but magnified in the extended, book-length form, where the capacity for closeness, intrusion and harm is greater. The comparison of Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *The Final Days* and Capote's *In Cold Blood* sets up the ethical issues (Chapters 3 and 4), which are further elucidated in the next chapter, focusing on developing trust with sources while maintaining editorial independence and critiquing Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*. These chapters explore the boundaries, tensions, ethics and, less explicitly, the rewards of the journalist-source relationship, and the veracity contract that exists between writers, story subjects and sources, and readers.

For Ricketson, comparing Woodward's (various works) and Capote's methods and works 'cracks open crucial issues for anyone wanting to write or understand true stories' (p. 41). Such issues include, but are not confined to: the dangers of an over-reliance on anonymous sources (Woodward); an expectation that the reader trusts what you write because of your reputation rather than for your transparent, sound and ethical practice; the belief that facts and values can be kept separate; concerns about accuracy and invention; and allowing literary merit (Capote and, perhaps, Malcolm) to both trigger and mask questionable practice.

Also explored are questions about the writer's presence in the text—the inclusion of 'I' in the narrative as an ethical, modest choice—and the 'omniscient narrator's voice' (p. 54), questionable because it suggests there is only one way of seeing and

representing what is taking place. Ricketson revisits voice and the writer's presence in the text in the writing section (see chapter 7), where he identifies voice and representation as existing along a spectrum from realist (eg, Capote) to modernist (eg, Joan Didion).

While he acknowledges that different approaches to voice will suit different kinds of stories, he advocates a more nuanced approach to voice than that envisaged at either end of the realist-modernist spectrum: one that is transparent about its research and writing process, and what it learns through telling the story, but does not get in the way of or overwhelm the story. Marr and Wilkinson achieve this in *Dark Victory*, which is written in narrative style—powerful, like a thriller—and which 'provides readers with ample means to scrutinise its sourcing and methods' (p. 142). In *The First Stone*, for Ricketson, Garner's voice tends to overshadow the story.

As for his own voice, Ricketson practises what he preaches. This book is reflexive. Ricketson is present in the text as both practitioner and scholar, in the way he advocates: enough to let us into relevant aspects of his subjectivity—his dispositions as Bourdieu would have it—but not so that his presence detracts from or overwhelms the story he is telling. *Telling True Stories* is more complete for it, as it also contributes to the conversation about the need for more reflective journalism.

Although *Telling True Stories* is written primarily for academics and writers of book-length journalism, Ricketson is also concerned with the 'everyday reader',

which he focuses on in the third section of the book. Here he develops the idea of ‘informed trust for narrative non-fiction works’ (p. 215): earned through transparency, where the work’s factual basis and truthfulness is demonstrated through ‘paratextual material’, such as acknowledgements, endnotes, a bibliography and notes to the reader on methods (see Chapter 12). Again, he demonstrates how this has and can work through his analysis of book-length journalism, including the different approaches taken by Malcolm Knox in *Secrets of the Jury Room*, and by Simons in *The Meeting of the Waters*.

The three parts in this book—research, writing and reception—form a framework for reflecting and doing. In *Telling True Stories* Ricketson devises his framework with acknowledgement to journalist and literary academic Daniel Lehman, who developed a similar framework for understanding the relationships between the reader, writer and subject in literary non-fiction. Ricketson’s

framework provides a guide—a series of recommendations—for ethical practice, drawn from the mistakes and successes of the writers he studies. Ricketson focuses his framework more closely on writers, and would-be writers (also useful for students), of book-length journalism, and hopes its relevance and applicability will mean its ready take-up by practitioners.

Time will tell. In the meantime, Ricketson wants us—writers and readers of book-length journalism—to think more critically about what we produce and how we produce it, as he encourages us to tell stories that express ‘truthfulness, independence and social justice—with the capacity to engage readers emotionally as well as intellectually’ (p. 156). Perhaps, to become more than a writer.

Reference

Gordimer, N. (1985). The essential gesture: Writers and responsibility. In *Granta 15*. Cambridge, UK: Granta Publications Limited.