Investigation into the technique of narrative journalism

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TECHNIQUE OF
NARRATIVE JOURNALISM

by

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Narrative journalism is a journalism technique that uses the chief tools of fiction—scenes, action, dialogue, character, etc.—to tell non-fiction stories. Over three feature stories, I explored how narrative journalism can be used to create stories as intimate, interesting and compelling as any fictional yarn. With each of my three features, I searched for the fiction tools most appropriate to tell my stories and adapted them to suit my subject matter. After completing my three features, I explained what I learned in an essay about the process.
Table of Contents

Libby, Montana 1
The Cliff’s Notes to Buntport 23
The Frye Rebellion 38
Writing Narrative Journalism 52
Les hunts through his big, black Rolodex with purpose. In the next three hours he aims to get in touch with every Montana politician he can. He needs to find out if they’re coming to his small, northwest corner of the state to see the latest film documenting the ruin of Libby.

“Good afternoon, I’d like to speak to Denise. Is this Denise? Hi, this is Les Skramstad up in Libby. Well, I got a request for you. Are you up to making another trip to Libby tonight? Yeah. Yeah. Well, we-”

Les leans back against the counter and moves his dirty, red trucker cap around on his head then returns his hand to the Rolodex beside the microwave. He choke's a bit on a cough, puts his hand to his mouth to quell it.

“Then you’re probably not going to make it up to Libby, are you?” he asks. “Well, the reason I’m wondering is…” He tells Denise—an aide in Montana Senator Conrad Burns’ office—about the documentary showing tonight. He says it’s called Libby, Montana and that it’s about the community-wide asbestos contamination, and people’s struggle to keep themselves and the town alive. He reminds Denise that he, his wife and three of his five children have asbestosis—a scarring of the lungs that leads to breathing problems and heart failure.

With bowlegs and clumsy steps, he crosses the kitchen, pulls a chair away from the dinner table and plants himself in it. As he listens, he fingers the curls of
the cord. He’s been retired a decade, but his hands are still rough, dirty, marked with unusual cuts and scrapes.

Les’s wife, Norita, comes into the kitchen and pours a cup of black coffee from the half-empty pot on the counter. She sits down across from her husband and watches him listening to the other end of the line.

“Well, it’s just one showing up here,” Les tells Denise.

“Tell her about the Missoula show,” whispers Norita.

“They are showing it down in Missoula at the Wilma Theater tomorrow and Norita and I will both be down there. But here’s my request. I think it’d be really nice if someone from Conrad’s office could come and I’d guess I’d like to see you there because I’ve talked to you once before. It’s something that’s going to be really important to this asbestos fight that we’ve got going.”

“Are they coming?” Norita whispers.

“Right it’s at seven o’clock.” says Les. “Yeah, that’s right. Well, that’s a shame.”

Les and Denise chat a few seconds more then Les hangs up.

“Are they coming?” Norita asks aloud.

“Ah, they can’t make it.”

“Yeah, we knew that.”

* * *
The Dome Theater's pastel blue and art deco stands out against the gray of Wednesday morning's Mineral Avenue. Libby's old mainstreet—whose heyday began to fade more than a decade ago—looks cold and unused. Other than the theater and its chromatic marquee, the buildings are stone and dull stucco. The sidewalks are almost empty and traffic is slow.

Tuesday's Mineral Avenue wasn't much different. The last busy, jubilant day on the downtown street was Sunday when the Libby Logger basketball team returned with the town's second state A boys' championship.

On Saturday night, Libby defeated Belgrade in triple overtime to win the championship. Tournament MVP Kyle Stantus sunk a 3-pointer with three seconds left to send the game into its first overtime. By the night's end, Stantus had scored 41 of Libby's 96 points. He and his team had made hometown history.

On Sunday, the returning team was greeted by an improvised parade. A hundred cars and trucks lined the streets. The drivers honked horns and flashed lights and watched the town's heroes travel down Mineral and up California back to the high school. Getting off the bus, the townspeople applauded with tears and energetic, congratulatory handshakes.

The first Logger state championship came in 1966. Back then, no one knew that trouble that was coming. In 1966 the Logger's starting point guard was just a high school senior and not yet Marc Racicot, Montana's most ascendant politician. He would go on to become, first the state's attorney general, then a two-term governor and President Bush's campaign director.
In 1966, the townspeople knew the W.R. Grace Corporation as a generous employer, a mining company any community would be lucky to have. When the team brought that first championship home, no one knew that the company was poisoning residents and the environment with deadly asbestos fibers. No one knew that the fibers from their vermiculite mine would result in asbestosis for Les and a thousand other residents. That more than 200 would be dead from working at the mine, or washing miners’ dusty coveralls, or playing king of the mountain in tailings piles next to the Little League field. In 1966, Libby was known for basketball and good company jobs. By the late ’90s the town became the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history.

The Loggers’ most recent championship transformed the town for a few days into the pride rich community it once was. A local newspaper editorial praised its hometown boys saying, “This moment belongs to Coach Winslow and the Logger basketball team for an extraordinary job.” The Rosauers’ supermarket’s flash-bulb sign blinked “Congrats State B-Ball Champs!!!!” Two dozen of the town’s businesses along Highway 2—which has long replaced Mineral Avenue as the town’s main drag—had similar messages, movable block lettering on signs or hand painted tributes in the Loggers’ colors of blue and gold.

That Sunday afternoon Mineral Avenue was as busy as it gets, but by Wednesday, most of the excitement has waned. The lone sign on Mineral congratulating the boys sits in front of Cabinet Books & Music. Written on the tiny dry erase board: “Way to go guys! Thanks for bringing a little sunshine back to Libby.”
A few blocks away, the Dome Theater’s marquee bares a message in contrast to all the congratulations. It announces tonight’s film: *Libby, Montana*. A High Plains Film. Free. The posters for Thursday’s movies—Big Fish and The Butterfly Effect—are still up. To find the closest *Libby* poster, one has to go across the street and two blocks west to the town’s EPA field office. In the office window hangs a small poster taped up slightly crooked and with a third of it bent back and caught behind a blind. It features an old man with his back to the camera. He’s slouching, turned slightly to the right and staring at a field of crosses commemorating those who died from Grace’s asbestos contamination.

The single employee in the office—site manager Courtney Zamora—doesn’t know that the poster is for the movie. She’s seen the Dome’s marquee but hasn’t put the two together yet. Courtney is a minor character in the film, mostly seen in the background of shots featuring combative EPA meetings and clean-up scenes with men in hazmat suits. The filmmakers behind *Libby*—Dru Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis—interviewed Courtney along with a half dozen of her peers. Courtney remembers the filmmakers only vaguely—there have been so many journalists and filmmakers she’s talked with.

While Courtney doesn’t remember much about Dru and Doug, many do remember the filmmakers. The two stood out in *Libby*: Dru, short, compact with scraggly beard. Doug, tall, lanky, clean shaven but with a long ponytail. Yes, their cameras gave them away, but even without their forty pounds of equipment, they’d be picked out as not-from-around-these-parts. Les describes them as Missoula-looking: grungy, granola, young. George Bauer, Bob Dedrick and the
crowd at the Deluxe barber shop saw the same thing Les did when the pair walked into the shop for the first time three-years ago.

"I knew they weren’t coming in for a haircut," says George.

***

The Deluxe is an anachronism. It is, on this Wednesday, as it was when Dru and Doug stopped to roll tape here three years ago, and as it has been for the last three decades. For the old men of the town, it serves as barbershop, lodge and soapbox. If the Deluxe was in Atlantic City there’d be framed, yellowed black and white photographs of Rocky Marciano and Frank Sinatra. In Washington, D.C. it’d be Duke Ellington and Martin Luther King. But in Libby, the wall of fame is dominated by high school sports stars.

The far wall of the Deluxe is covered in newsprint. There are clippings from the ’66 championship, last Saturday’s win and even neighboring town Troy’s championship. Pushed off separate from the stories is a poster for Libby, Montana. Next to the poster are an Indian dream catcher and two photographs of the 200 white, wooden crosses.

As proprietor George pulls hair away from a customer’s head with a black plastic comb and clips the bangs, he chats with Bob Dedrick.

"We’re proud of those boys."

"Yup," says Bob.
Both George and Bob have asbestosis. George looks sicker—George’s face is slightly sunken, his eyes a little dark under the University of Montana ball cap—but it’s Bob’s hunching, defeated back that’s featured on the film’s poster, but right now he looks strong in his worn work gloves and Carhartt jacket.

“That was ’66,” says George pointing out an old photo to the man in the barber chair. “Racicot was one of them. Bob aren’t you related to Racicot?”

“Almost,” says Bob grumpily. “Almost, but that’s not something I talk about.”

George and the man in the chair smile.

“Martz isn’t like Racicot,” says George, musing about Montana’s current governor, Judy Martz.

“No, she’s not,” says Bob.

“When she first came up here she was cold as ice. But she came here a couple times and she warmed up when she saw the town and saw how sick people were.”

“She’d been fed a bunch a garbage by the Republican Party about how she couldn’t support Libby. It hurt her politically to help us.”

Bob and George volley the conversation back and forth easily. Their statements are meant to set up each other’s. From their easy speech it’s clear they’ve been at this a long time. Starting with local sports and passing the topic back and forth until it reaches some tangential conclusion like politics.
”I guarantee you there ain’t no way in hell I’m going to vote for Bush,” says Bob turning to lean on the glass door and look out at the cold. “But I’m going to have a hell of time voting for Kerry.”

George laughs and the man in chair smiles.

“I can’t listen to them,” Bob says. “The Republicans sit there and bash the Democrats. Then the Democrats sit there and bash the Republicans.”

“No, I think it’s going to be a good race.”

Bob turns to the window again.

“Well, I’ve got to get going now,” says Bob like he doesn’t but will.

“Well, I’ll see you at the film tonight, right?” says George.

“Oh, yeah, I ain’t missing it.”

“Poster boy,” whispers George to his customer. Then to no one in particular: “I think it’s a good deal. I think it’s good for Libby.”

“I hope they do well,” says Bob who still hasn’t left. “I like the guys. I wish that they could get this on the national networks and get this out there.”

Neither Bob nor George has seen Libby, and neither knows what to expect. Dru and Doug made a half dozen documentaries before Libby that Bob and George haven’t even heard of.

“Everyone that’s come here to help us has been real nice,” says George.

George has his wall, but Bob has a collection of his own. He has nearly a complete library of Libby stories and newscasts. He has a copy of Dust to Dust and two of the books. He has VCR tapes of 20/20 and 60 Minutes. And he thinks
That every journalist who's come up has done a good job. Just reporting about the problem, just listening to the people.

* * *

Gayla Benefield sits at her kitchen table labeling envelopes. A thousand labeled by hand to be mailed to EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt in Washington, D.C. Her ringed, wrinkled, 50-something fingers moving like a machine. Beside her sits her mother-in-law, Leona.

“Did you just call back over there?” asks Leona.

“Yes,” Gayla says without looking up from her work.

“I wonder why they called you instead of me.”

“Well, because you get pissy when they don’t call you,” says Gayla with a long laugh that rattles down at the base her throat.

Leona smiles for a moment, then doesn’t, then quietly, blankly stares at Gayla’s green and yellow parakeets beside the window. Leona’s son Donald is in surgery 160 miles away in Spokane, Washington. Leona has two sons, Donald and David. Her son David is married to Gayla. Donald had been suffering from chronic chest pains, but when doctors ran dye through his heart they couldn’t find a blockage. It was his lungs—the asbestosis that rusts the organs—that likely caused the pain. That was all Gayle and Leona knew for now. News would come later once the doctors got into the lungs to take a look.
“What were they?” Gayla asks her mother-and-law without looking up. “Donald was a year and a half and David was three when they lived down by the railroad tracks?”

Leona nods her head and clicks on her coffee cups with her nails. Leona wears an oversized sweatshirt, Gayla a holidayish sweater. “They only lived there for a year and half, right?” Leona nods again. “And they both got it from those train cars hauling the material.”

A few days ago Gayla’s husband, David, got out of hospital with pneumonia. His asbestosis hasn’t progressed as far as his brother’s, but pneumonia brought on by a weakened lung capacity is a bad sign. Gayla’s mother spent a couple of weeks every winter from 1978 to 1985 in the hospital with pneumonia before she was finally diagnosed with asbestosis. Her father died at the age of 62 after learning that he never had the heart condition local doctors told him he had, that his pain was due to asbestosis. Through Gayla’s stories and old photographs and home movies both her mother and father’s deaths are documented in Libby, Montana.

Gayla toils methodically. It’s work she’s used to. Letter writing campaigns, petitions, phone calls to the EPA, politicians, reporters. She piles the envelopes in tall stacks that sag precariously at the top like trees laden with snow. She chats with her mother-in-law paying more attention to her letters than the conversation.

“Do you want to go and see the film tonight?”
“Oh, well. I might,” replies Leona.

“You’ve gotta wear a long dress,” says Gayla smiling. “It’s a premiere.”

“Well, I haven’t got a long dress.”

Gayla laughs her deep, rattling laugh again.

“I’m the star you know.”

Leona nods and clicks on her coffee cup some more.

“Did they say when Don will be home?” she asks Gayla.

“No, they’ll know more tomorrow. I don’t think they’re going to release him because they want to do the tests while they got him over there, so it will probably be a couple days. But don’t worry, I’m sure Dr. Whitehouse is involved.”

The phone rings. It’s not the hospital. A neighbor calling to tell Gayla about a union demonstration planned for this evening.

* * *

Les takes a sip of coffee from his stained travel mug. By this time, he’s deep into his phone calls and needs a break. “This is really frustrating me,” he says. “Politicians. When they want a vote they’re Johnny-on-the-spot. They did say they may be able to get someone there at the Missoula show.”

“Well at least that will be something,” Norita says.
“Sure but it ain’t any further from here to Missoula as it is from Missoula to here. At least that’s the way I look at it when we’re looking at stuff that serious.”

Aides and chiefs-of-staff from the offices of senators, representatives and governors have all made excuses. The pipes in Senator Max Baucus’ nearest office burst and the staff is in chaos. Everyone from Senator Conrad Burn’s office is currently on the road. Les now concentrates his efforts on Governor Judy Martz.

Like many Libby residents, Les and Norita have shaken hands and spoken face-to-face with Martz, Baucus, Burns and a handful of other politicians. But according to Les and Norita, Martz has done more than any other politician to help the town by designating Libby an EPA superfund site. She is also the politician the couple has gotten to know the best. Just down the hall from where the two sit is a framed glossy of Martz standing in front of the Montana State flag. It’s signed in shining gold ink: “Les, I so appreciate your friendship. Thank you for your honesty and civility my friend. My best to both you and Norita. Judy.” The governor also brought the couple to the capital to personify Libby’s resilience during a state of the state address. While the governor’s staff has told Les that she can’t come, they’ve promised to pass on the message that he called.

Other than the two local newspaper editors—both of whom are going to try to make it—Les hasn’t bothered calling locals. He knows which friends are going and which are not, and he considers it a waste of breath to call the mayor, town council members and county commissioners.
As Norita goes to switch off the coffee maker, the phone rings.

"Hello," she answers. "Yeah, who is it? OK just a second." She turns to her husband and hands him the phone. "It's Baucus' office."

"Hello? Jim, how you doing? Well I guess I'm not doing to bad. The reason I called is..." Les goes into his pitch on why it's important that someone from Baucus' office come tonight. "Well I guess that my point is that we'd be really happy to see you there in Missoula but we'd sure like to have someone here. This is where this all started and I've—"

He's cut off. He listens again and goes through his series of motions again.

"Now I know Max has been there a number of times but this is—" Les cuts himself off when he breaks into a coughing fit and the man at the other end of the line takes over the conversation. When Les recovers, he tries to reassert himself in the conversation. "Yeah. Well, I—. Absolutely, I want to talk to that guy face-to-face. Well, could you keep me informed on that?"

This is turning out to be Les' longest conversation of the day and he looks encouraged or determined.

"Well, we've gone on a letter writing campaign. Did I tell you about that? Well, yeah—" Les fails. No one can come tonight.

* * *

13
The filmmakers thought they had arrived late. For 20 minutes they scrambled around town to find an extra hundred feet of cable for their DVD projector. Then they spent an hour setting up, duct tape rows of seats to make sure so no heads or hats would obscure the projection. But after everything is plugged in and taped down and ready to go, there is still an hour before the film starts.

While they wait in the lobby, while Dru quietly munches comfort food, the teenage girls who run the concession stand giggle to themselves. One girl is telling a story about a boy named Max. The other is wiping the dry erase board down and writing in bubbly letters: “Welcome to Dome!!! Enjoy the show!!!” Both the girls and Dru and Doug are oblivious to each other’s presence.

“We’ll cut it as we need to,” Doug tells Dru who is stroking his beard, making sure there’s no popcorn in it.

As they munch popcorn they lapse into an easy conversation. One that they could normally have for hours, one which wastes time well. They discuss what film festivals to submit *Libby* to and what they might be able to cut from the two-and-a-half hours to make the film more palatable as an entry.

“So we know people are going to have a hard time getting into it during the first 30 minutes,” says Doug.

“People in Libby won’t be bored by the first thirty minutes,” Dru says vacantly tossing popcorn into his mouth.

“No, they won’t,” replies Doug.

The two fall mute and meander from the lobby and into the theater.
At 6:15 Les and Norita arrive. They are the first and they park right out front letting their old, American sedan idle for ten minutes as they wait for others to show. A moment before the couple left for the Dome, the governor called back in person. She was polite, apologetic and quick: She couldn’t make tonight or tomorrow because she would be on the road, but she asked for Les to inquire about a copy of the film for her. She said she wants to see it.

But a host of other elect officials and prominent Libby citizens don’t want to see it. Grace’s lone representative in town says he has a business meeting. The mayor says he knows the story already. Others can’t find the time or can’t find babysitters. But even without those staying away, by 6:30 there’s a steady flow of people entering the theater. Bob and George from the Deluxe arrive, as does Gayla with 25 members of her family in tow including all five of her children and two grandchildren. She seems in high spirits and chats with friends casually as if church just let out. An older lady inquires about her brother-in-law’s health.

“They’re going to check his lungs tomorrow because it wasn’t his heart,” says Gayla matter-of-factly.

“Well that’s probably some good news.”

“Well I hope so,” she says smiling.

Dru and Doug have taken refuge behind their taped off row. There isn’t much for them to do so they recheck everything. They fine tune the angle of the projector and, for a moment, look like nervous hosts at a dinner party preparing a slide show of their recent trip to the Grand Canyon.
With nothing more to do, Dru and Doug drift through the theater—anonymous to most. Dru returns to the lobby, which, by now, is full of boisterous conversation and a crowd in front of the popcorn machine. There's no discussion of the film or its subject. Instead, serious themes like the governor's race, the reconstruction of Highway 2 and the labor demonstrators outside on Mineral Avenue dominate the animated assembly—the union is upset over the wage cuts of workers contracted by the EPA to remove asbestos contamination from the towns' homes. It's too packed for Dru to avoid being dragged into a conversation. A woman who recognizes him as someone involved in the film comes up to him.

“What are those guys doing out there?” she asks.

“They’re union guys.”

“Are they here for you?”

“Oh, no,” Dru says laughing nervously. “I didn’t have anything to do with that. I think they were planning that before.”

Dru retreats back into the theater and behind the projector where Doug is already sitting. The 500-seat theater is almost full and the two have to repeatedly tell people they can’t cross the tape. Finally it’s five minutes until start time. Dru keeps looking around, scratching his neck beard, which makes a prickly scraping sound. He says, “I didn’t think it was going to be this full,” as if he’s disappointed at the turn out. He wonders, half in earnest, if it was a good idea to bring the film to Libby.

As the mayor said earlier today, this town knows its story. But the 400 here tonight are attracted to another retelling. They want to see what the
filmmakers missed or included, how they made decisions or how they spun the watershed moments.

Here, the filmmakers can't cheat. Even if they know more than the townspeople about certain twists in the tale, they are still outsiders. The biography that consumed them for four years will have a sort of closure tonight, and it may be months, years, until they return—if they ever return. For the 400 about to watch themselves, this isn't a final word, but another page to turn.

Dru and Doug stand and walk to the front of the room. There's a hush and the two thank everyone for coming and explain that there will be a short Q & A after the film. Then Dru adds: “We made as honest a film as we thought we could make.” The two make their way back up the long, thin aisle to the projector. The house lights go down. The film begins.

Before the first frame foreboding music plays. Then a red sun appears and moves forward until viewers are taken into the sun and out of the flame emerges a primordial earth, a grainy pink tinted wasteland. The footage is culled from a decades-old U.S. Bureau of Mines reel, a quirky promotional film obtained from the National Archives that explains how, during the earth’s formation, asbestos was created. It resembles a ’60s junior high instructional film—complete with an ominous soundtrack and a booming, overly dramatic narrator.

“About a billion years ago or so, when time was young, our earth was a lonely, barren world,” announces the narrator. “No bird song broke the stillness. The wind cried. The storm spoke.”
Outside of Libby, the footage is meaningless camp. But here it elicits a shallow gallows humor.

The film bleeds into a series of Super 8 movies. Black and white and fuzzy color clips of a merry boomtown. It’s Libby, but not as it is today. The older crowd—which dominates tonight’s showing—sees themselves or their parents in the salad days. They chuckle at the loggers, smile at the pretty girls in classic JC Penney print dresses. Mineral Avenue buzzes in peaceful Mayberry fashion—unlike the Gut, as the current crop of teenagers have christened the strip, with nighttime cars pumping out bass beats and driving too fast.

On top of the footage come voiceovers from yet to be introduced characters, but voices this group recognizes. Gayla’s voice says: “This is Libby, Montana and things don’t happen in Libby.”

Watching this Gayla just sits with her hands folded in her lap and takes it in.

Twenty minutes into the film a few teenagers leave. As they walk through the empty lobby and push their way through the big double doors to the outside the theater owner from behind the concessions stand says: “What are you girls out of here already?”

“Yeah,” says one.

Her friend chimes: “We can’t sit in those seats. They’re too hard.”

“Oh, it was probably too educational for you,” he shouts after the closing doors.
The film’s story unwinds, layers are peeled off. More stock footage, shots of mountains and streams, quick bites of interviews, but nothing overcast. It’s not until Earl Lovick appears that the film becomes more than just flashes of Libby history.

Mr. Lovick—a Grace Company manager—is being deposed at Les’ negligence suit against the company. The footage is beat up VCR tape and Lovick looks like a disheveled undertaker. His demeanor is chilly, rolling eyes and graceless pregnant pauses before answering questions. He seems evasive on the subject of what his company knew about the dangers of its product. The attorney deposing him is listing the company’s wrong doings and making Mr. Lovick explain to the jurors how dozens of employees died.

The townspeople didn’t attend Les’ trial and the local or national media didn’t cover it. For most, this is the first time they are seeing Earl Lovick presented as a company man, not a fellow townsperson.

From this point on almost no one gets up. After an hour, the film reaches Libby’s worst moments, but the people stay put watching themselves. They watch what is common knowledge in Libby: EPA manager Paul Peronard cursing at his superiors over lost funding, Ronald Reagan and Peter Grace happily shaking hands, Gov. Martz announcing that all she can do for the people of Libby is pray, EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman promising that government is here for them. Then, along with all the milestones, they watch themselves do what they do everyday. George cuts hair at the Deluxe. Les in the same shirt he wore today.
Gayla’s simple tasks of advocacy work. The cameras even capture the Dome Theater’s marquee blinking on a dark Mineral Avenue.

Two young girls slowly, rhythmically feed Milk Duds and Mike and Ikes into their mouths. A man in a yellow cap pulls at his mustache. And a constant stream of coughing into sleeves.

The theater is settled, but Dru is not. After an hour and a half of nervous watching, he goes to the lobby. He orders Reese’s cups and peanut M&M’s and, eating the candy, stands off to the side, next to a life-sized, cardboard cutout of James Dean. Across the lobby from him, next to the Marilyn Monroe cutout, is a man with a tube through his throat. He is softly wheezing and wiping fluid off the tube with a stiff paper towel. Dru finishes his candy and goes back into the theater.

The final scene. A Memorial Day salute to the dead, 200 white, wooden crosses, with names Gayla has stenciled in Sharpie. As a crowd gathers around the memorial, someone reads a final list. The voice calls slowly the names of the dead. A man in the audience with a tough face and oil-stained Carhartt jacket is crying. He lets the tears be.

The screen returns to black. Two beats after the credits begin, after Dru and Doug’s names appear in white against the black, ten seconds of applause breaks out over the tune “Miner’s Waltz.” The house lights come up and everyone but a handful gets up and leaves.
“Hey,” shouts Doug. “After everybody files out, we’ll just be here in case anybody has any questions. We just want to let everybody who wants to leave leave.”

But no one wants to stay for a post-film Q & A. Gayla and her family, the girls with the candy, most everyone exits together, and the theater is stripped to a bare 20 stragglers in less than two minutes.

Bob comes up behind Dru and turns him around with a hand on his shoulder. “Dru, nice job,” he says.

“Thanks, Bob, I’m glad you liked it.” The two shake and then Bob is gone.

Thanks and good jobs echo over and over with a pat on the back from the ladies and a hand shake from the men.

By the time Dru and Doug are done with the hand shakes and back pats, only Les and Norita remain.

“I learned one thing,” laughs Les. “If a guy’s sitting in a meeting and he’s on camera, he better not pick his nose.”

Norita laughs with him.

“We wouldn’t— Ah, we wouldn’t do that,” says Dru acquiescing.

“Naw, I know. You did OK, I just don’t photograph for shit,” says Les.

“What are you talking about?” Dru says in a tone of voice he’d use talking to his grandfather. “You’re a handsome buck.”

Les looks good right now—the only thing worn about him is the old coffee cup he cradles in his hands. He’s showered and wearing a nice, clean shirt and jeans. His dirty cap from this afternoon has been replaced with a spotless
black cowboy hat. He looks jubilant. The two shake hands. They make plans for tomorrow and the Missoula show. Les and Norita leave and Doug and Dru pack up in the empty theater.
The audiences’ fervor has reached its pitch. The cast of Denver’s Buntport Theatre Company kicks like Rockettes and sings in bawdy *Guys and Dolls* style: “There’s no Ernie like this Emie/He’s the best Ernie we know.” Ernie, played by actor Brian Colonna, mounts the table at center stage and swirls the red and white checked tablecloth around his head. The four other cast members break from their kick line and begin to spin the table singing: “Even when he forgets all his lines/He comes out looking mighty fine/When he enters, the damn crowd claps every time/Cause he steals the show!”

The 150-or-so regulars infatuated with Buntport’s live situation comedy, *Magnets on the Fridge*, roar. Four high school girls in matching, long-sleeve *Magnets* T-shirts squeal and pinch each other’s arms. A man in Dockers holds his belly laughing like a ’50s TV cliché. His daughter, beside him in black, fishnet sleeves and thick mascara, clutches her purse to her chest giggling. The hooting’s so loud the lyrics are lost.

Brian—just 5 foot 8, but gigantically enthusiastic—eggs on the crowd’s adulation with winks and a self-aware, impish grin. Then, purposefully off-key, he belts out the final line: “Cuz’ I steal the shooooow.”

This is the season’s final episode of *Magnets on the Fridge* and the *Magnets*’ groupies know it. The gimmick that fuels the sit-com is a squabbling, catty book club where verbal jibes and song and dance are more common than reading. The crowd always goes wild for musical numbers—so naturally Buntport
does a lot of them—but this finale is more exhilarating because there is a sense of completion. *Magnets*’ third season is ending.

Eventually the actors return to their trademark arrangement around the couch. The *Magnets*’ characters resume the argument they were having before breaking out in song. Erik Edborg’s character, Paul, cries out that he can’t take all the bickering and that he’s quitting book club. From the audience comes a collective “Oooh.” Without Erik’s Paul—the club’s only enthusiastic member—*Magnets*’ future is in jeopardy. One by one the remaining members of the book club bow out until there is only Brian’s Ernie. Lonely and confused he sings timidly, voice trailing off: “There’s no Ernie—(sniffle)—like this Ernie/I won’t—(sniffle)—believe it’s not so.”

Black out. Then, from the overhead projector used to create the credits, a picture of the five sit-com characters on the couch flashes on the screen above the stage. An ominous voice over asks, “Will these five ever talk to each other again? Will there even be a fourth season of *Magnets on the Fridge*?” The audience gasps. Then the voiceover trades in the portentous tone for a bubbly, late-night-talk-show inflection: “Find out next season, starting November 16th and 17th.” The audience laughs with genuine relief and the cast comes out for a last bow. Then they disappear into the final blackout.

* * *
In the almost-decade since the members of Buntport graduated from Colorado Spring's Colorado College, they have written and produced 14 original shows. Their first, just months after finishing up at the college's drama department, transformed the legend of *Don Quixote* into a satire of academic life using only chalk boards and erasers as props. A few months later, Buntport found a permanent space in Denver's warehouse district—sharing a building with the Economy Greek Food Corporation. Here, the troupe began to build a tiny following with their madly inventive productions. The players re-envisioned the *Odyssey* as a walking tour where the myth is told through Walkmans. They transformed Shakespeare's goriest play, *Titus Andronicus*, into a musical. When not blaspheming the classics, Buntport ridiculed commercialism in a documentary-style dark comedy about the reindeer Donner and his battle with the corporate world of North Pole Inc, and the company imagined what it would be like to be a modern-day government drone in Turkmenistan.

The company is clearly more sophisticated than the sexual and slapstick humor that dominates *Magnets on the Fridge*—as illustrated by the dozens of local awards won for their non-*Magnets* shows. The sit-com began as a simple way to keep the Buntport Theatre space alive during weeks when the company wasn't mounting a show. The company didn't think it'd be a hit, and was certain it wouldn't pay the rent. Yet both are now true. *Magnets* is funny and witty, it's even social commentary, but it's not the high art of the theater. It's a sit-com—a sit-com with cursing and not-ready-for-primetime lewdness—but a sit-com nonetheless. *Magnets* will return next season because it's easy, quick and is
Buntport’s bread and butter. While their other shows can be well attended—selling 500 tickets over a weeks worth of nights—Magnets is a Denver event. An event that has begun to wear on the actors. The tall, blond, Nordic, Erik Edborg, says the sit-com is entertaining and it makes the company money, but it undersells Buntport’s talent, intellect and originality.

Now that the season is finally over, the cast is relieved but has no time for rest. The day after Magnets ends, Buntport’s players are back in their black box theater space preparing to stage their next show, “2-in-1,” which they have constantly hyped during the final weeks of Magnets in hopes they can parlay a little of the cult-hit’s momentum into a piece they actually spent more than a week slapping together.

***

Buntport’s theater space is dark by day. Without windows, it shouldn’t be possible to tell the difference between day and night when inside—but it’s easy to tell.

At night the theater is swept clean, floors mopped and toilets scrubbed with bleach. In the black-and-white tiled foyer there is a mini-fridge stocked with Cokes and spring water and Bud Light. The drinks are complimentary with ticket—but donations are accepted in a quaint wicker basket or in the pocket of the mannequin wearing tuxedo pants. At night the heat is on. At night the house lights are up and the ticket lobby, the foyer, the rows of seats, are all filled with
excited people vacationing from an evening in front of the TV or a late night at work.

During the day the theater falls apart. Cans and bottles and candy wrappers line the risers where audience chairs are left heaved about across the black, chipping wood. The fridge smells of someone’s leftover pizza. The space is cold and dark.

Buntport performs at night. Days are for rehearsals.

Today, Wednesday, the rehearsals for “2-in-1” are rushed because on Friday—just two days from now—the show opens. In about 48-hours, “2-in-1”’s three-week run begins.

The show is made up of two one-act plays and features four of Buntport’s five players: There’s the Camel Light-smoking, gum-popping Hannah Duggan; the redhead with lush eyelashes and a flapper-hair do, Erin Rollman; the short, enthusiastic Brian Colonna; and Erik Edborg, the tall Swede who looks like Jim Carrey on a low dose of Valium. Evan Weissman, the newest member of the troupe, who in Adidas sneakers and beard looks more like a soccer player than a thespian, is the only Buntport actor not in the show—the idea being, on rare occasions, like once a year, an actor should get a break.

The first piece of “2-in1” is “...and this is my significant bother”—an adaptation of nine short stories by James Thurber. By Wednesday’s run through, “bother” is well polished. Evan, whose job it is to watch and give notes, has only nitpicky problems, mostly troubles in transition. How can the actors get from here to there in time while changing costume? Matt Petraglia, the company’s quiet,
Mr.-Fix-It techhead, says he can just alter a few lighting and music cues to give them more time.

The second one act, *Word-Horde: an adaptation of the Cliff's Notes of Beowulf*, is a mess.

Halfway through the *Word-Horde* rehearsal someone screws up a line. Smacking a stick of gum in her cheek, Hannah Duggan insists it’s not her. Hannah doesn’t usually screw up—her day job is cocktail waitressing at Denver’s Comedy Works, and she brings a blue-collar work ethic to the company. But Hannah, like the rest of the cast, has missed a half dozen lines during today’s jerky run. The piece’s pace—about ten gags per minute (a few of which are in Old English)—makes it more challenging than the slower, character-driven “bother.” But this time Hannah insists it was Brian, and not her, who made the mistake.

“She doesn’t believe that she’s wrong,” says Erin Rollman batting her lashes.

“I know she doesn’t,” says Brian. “I can see it in her eyes.”

Erik giggles.

“Matt corrected you last time,” Erin says turning to Hannah and at the same time gesturing to Matt who is quietly eating Wendy’s in the tech booth. “Do you not remember when he did?”

Matt keeps his head down and chews.

“Oh, my god whatever,” shouts Erin. “Someone go get a fucking script.”

The four actors have stopped acting even though the scene from *Word-Horde* has long since disintegrated. They’ve just segued into a skit about a
dysfunctional theater troupe. *Word-Horde* is odd—in the play the actors wear black-and-yellow Cliffs Notes’ colored mechanic’s jumpsuits with “Buntport Theatre” embroidered on the back and patches with their real names cattycorner from their hearts. It’s so odd in fact that this ad-libbed dysfunctional theater troupe skit feels as if maybe it could be part of the show and not a lampoon of a stereotypical theater company’s bickering. Or maybe they really are bickering? Again, maybe Hannah just needs another Camel Light break and knows she’ll get it if she plays at a fake temper tantrum.

Matt fiddles with the house lights and finishes his lunch. Evan puts down his note pad next to his Adidas and widens his grin. Erin, Brian and Erik watch Hannah pretend to seethe as she chews furiously. Then suddenly:

“Wow,” says Hannah thinking out loud. “That is sooo not my line. But why can’t I just say that anyway?”

“Because you are being a jerk about it,” says Erin.

“Am I?”

“Yeah,” says Brian. “You have this air of, ‘Whatever dumb asses,’ and it’s making everyone uncomfortable.”

“It’s not whatever dumb asses. It’s just whatever.”

Hannah can’t stop smiling. And everyone smiles along with her. The histrionic theater troupe skit is fun. More fun then the *Word-Horde* line through and certainly more fun than their day jobs—cocktail waitressing, foaming cappuccino or teaching theater to hormone-crazed high school students. All but Erik work outside the theater—Erik’s Swedish father and Colorado-native mother
have taken a risk on helping fund the troupe and he helps make sure Buntport is at least slouching toward solvency.

“I’ll say the line. I don’t believe that it’s mine, but I’ll say it.”

“See it’s that,” says Brian. “That’s the attitude I’m talking about.”

They go on in this manner hyping their phony anger. If Buntport had a director, or head writer, or lead actor, he or she would have put a stop to this long ago. But because Buntport operates like a socialist artist collective—they all write, direct and design every show they do—it’s easier for one headstrong personality, in this case Hannah’s, to bring the rehearsal to a grinding halt. The only thing that can get things moving again seems to be a script—which Erin has managed to locate. It was Hannah’s mistake all along—something everyone seemed to know.

“Maybe you should apologize to everyone for being so rude,” says school teacher-voiced Erin.

“I didn’t think I was being so rude but I apologize.”

“That wasn’t sincere.”

“OK, rewind. Let’s go back to the beginning. Tell me again what my line is.”

Brian feeds Hannah the line.

“Oh, right guys. I’m so sorry. How embarrassing. Sorry about that.”

“That was fun,” says Erik smiling. “That was a fun break.”

* * *
Thursday is as close as Buntport has to a day off. The two-night run of *Magnets* is over and the three night run of “2-in-1” doesn’t begin until tomorrow. But today the company’s more tired than yesterday. The transitions in “bother” have been worked out, but the *Word-Horde* is still a mess.

By the end of the rehearsal, the stage is littered with spent props. There are scores of props, most of which are constructed of copy-machine paper with the name of each prop printed over and over on the paper. Swords are made of paper that says “sword” in tiny letters repeated a hundred times. The same goes for horned Norse war helmets that look so natural on Erik, and the crowns and thrones, claws and check marks, pipes and purses. If the prop has a color that is associated with it, the ink matches the prop—gold coins say “gold” in gold ink and tiny drops of blood say “blood” in red ink. There is even a magnificent dragon with claws the size of crocodile jaws made entirely of cheap, Office Max paper. The stage becomes so littered, Buntport has written into the show that Hannah sweep the props back stage with a black-and-yellow striped push broom.

As the players back away from the mess and leave the stage, Erin says: “I really wish that it had gone well because I don’t want to do it again.”

No one responds to her. The wisecracking Evan neither jokes nor gives the notes he scribbled during the run, but defeatedly scratches his beard. The company finds seats in the audience or just off stage away from the mess.
“Should we just do it again?” asks Brian. They are coming up on just 24-hours before the show opens. Then optimistically: “We could take a break before we do.”

Like Erin, he doesn’t get a response.

“Well are we doing a run tomorrow?”

No one wants to talk about the show. After a minute of silence they start to move around. Hannah leaves for a cigarette break. Erin goes to the bathroom. Evan goes out with a list of things the troupe needs for the show: black electrical tape, hair clips, panty hose. Brian and Erik, like a despondent Mutt and Jeff, start to clean up. Without speaking, they gather on the stage, legs crossed and start to cut and tape and plug in the glue gun to mend the torn and tattered paper. They need new Geat finger puppets and Geat paper dolls, someone’s black-and-yellow Cliff’s Notes utility belt needs to be retaped, and the magic sword Beowulf uses to slay a vicious ogre has become flaccid. Brian’s taken on the task of trying to put some rigidity back in the four-foot paper sword.

“I thought we liked it bendy,” says Erik.

“Well I thought we voted yesterday that it was funnier if it was straight,” says Brian continuing to work on the sword.

“I don’t recall that.”

From here the conversation escalates to a slow, fuming argument over which is funnier a stiff paper sword or a bendy one. It’s a small detail, one of a hundred small details in the play that may flash too quickly or frequently to even register with the audience.
“You’re fucking pissing me off right now,” Brian tells Erik.

“I don’t care Brian, it’s not worth it.”

Erik walks away. The two quietly smolder. Brian begins undoing the work on the sword he began: peeling the freshly glued cardboard away from the paper hilt.

This unhurried bum is how Buntport's arguments often unfold. There are no outrageous tears or primadonna tantrums, no I-can’t-work-with-this-hack bawls. Just matrimonial needling about perfectionist details the audience may never notice.

With no director there must be bickering. There must be a zealous devotion to craft, to the acting, writing, the building of sets and costumes, the rigging of lights and selection of music. There must also be tension so the work seems important. Even if the subject of a fight is unimportant, arguments give the work value, weight. Where to place spike marks on the ground? What color tie to wear? Is a supple sword is funnier than a stiff sword? Whether the audience notices doesn’t seem to be the point, when the group collaborates and compromises and commits it makes the work better, at least to the performers.

“I don’t know what’s funnier,” says a frustrated Erin. “But if this how it’s going to go right now I think we’re going to fuck up another run through because everyone is so tense.”

“I’m not tense,” says Brian coolly. “This is how it always seems here.”

It begins to rain. Hannah returns from a smoke break with wet hair. Brian and Erik resolve their argument—bendy is funnier. There won’t be another run
through today. It rains harder and while the players silently cut and paste helmets and swords, the drops can be heard pounding the roof.

* * *

Brian’s playing Prince’s Purple Rain over the PA just loud enough to discourage conversation. It’s late Friday morning, hours before “2-in-1” goes up. The company’s preparing the space and has opted not to rehearse again—yesterday’s mediocre run will serve as dress rehearsal. Maybe it’s not having to do a run, or maybe just the waxing excitement of closing in on a performance, but the players are excited and tranquil. There’s a feeling of camaraderie as the song “Darling Nikki” plays. To the erotic beat and lyrics about a one night stand, the troupe engages in the mundane. Hannah irons a pair of Erik’s trousers for the “bother”. Erin brushes out a wig. Evan sweeps the stage. By the album’s end, Hannah has ironed a half-dozen suits and blouses and is outside smoking a cigarette. Erin is Aqua Netting her wig. And the men have neatly made rows of 90 audience chairs—60 fewer than what they put out for Magnets. The album ends and the company is ready for a dinner break before they need to return to the theater.

* * *
The live version of “Black Dog” off Led Zeppelin’s *The Song Remains the Same* fills the ticket lobby. Brian, Evan and Matt are quarrelling as they rock out to heavy-metal blues. Evan, who usually talks too stridently for any one to get a word in, is interrupted by Brian.

“OK you can say The Who is better,” says Brian. “But wouldn’t you say that these guys rock harder than The Who?”

“No,” Evan shouts above roar of guitar. “No one rocks harder than The Who.”

“No way, The Who are just loud, these guys actually have talent.”

“Oh my god.” Evan is in mock cardiac arrest. He’s put on his trademark uh-what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about expression—eyes wide, shoulders hunched, head shaking from side-to-side and his mouth in a big O. “The Who are fucking insane. Keith Moon is fucking insane, and Pete Townsend is fucking insane, and they blew all that shit up and now all the punk bands are trying to imitate them but they can’t get it right so I’m telling you that The Who is totally fucking insane.” He catches his breath; Brian and Matt are elated. Evan’s rants always take the edge off before a show. “Zeppelin rocks fun and rocks cool and rocks shit and rocks sex, but as a better band you have to take The Who.”

Evan looks through the hundred plus songs on the Buntport computer hard drive. The only Who song is “Who Are You?” A bad example of how hard the band rocks, says Evan. Without the music, he only has verbal, ammunition to back up his thesis so he changes gears. He puts the ’80s staple, “Rhythm of the Night.” He pumps the music through the PA system in the performance space and
dances his way from the ticket lobby, through the mannequins in the foyer and into the black box space. The actors are already in period dress for “bother.”

“Turn it up,” shouts Evan to Matt who’s taken his place in the production booth.

“The lights?” asks Matt.

“No. The music. The louder it is the better it sounds.”

Matt does so reservedly—he’s doesn’t like the song, but he seems to know better than to cross Evan when it comes to getting the troupe up and ready to go. Not being in the show, Evan’s defacto job has become glee club president—like a deranged entertainment director on a cruise ship. He’s dragged Erin off the bed that serves as the main prop for “bother”. They do a synchronized dance that entices Hannah, Brian, and Erik to join in. Evan leads them in unison claps.

“God damn, it’s a good song,” he shouts.

When it’s over everyone’s ready. It’s closing in on show time. Evan, who has to play the role of ticket vendor, retreats through the foyer and back to his post. Matt puts on the pre-show music. Hannah and Erin put on their make-up.

After ten minutes everything’s in place and everyone’s in full costume. Evan peeks his head in and tells the actors they’ve got five minutes until he needs to let the audience in.

For each of Buntport’s dozen plus shows a new pre-show ritual has developed. They arise out of non-sequitors and nonsense. Strange to them, they are extraterrestrial to an outsider. A minute or two after Evan poked his head in,
the four actors—Hannah, Erin, Brian and Eric—gather around the bed. They link arms and, seemingly without a cue, all but Brian, begin to sing.

“Sit on it and spin Brian, sit on it and spin, Brian is a big old bitch gonna sit on it and spin.”

They smile and let go. Hannah and Erin climb into bed and tuck themselves under the covers. Erik and Brian pantomime tap dance routines and '50s sauntering for a few minutes until Evan pops his head in again. It’s time to let the audience in. Brian and Erik climb into bed on either side of the women.

As the crowd files in, the four actors are all lying on their right sides with their left arms resting on their hips. They are all under the covers with just a naked arm showing and four matching gold wedding bands. The audience doesn’t pay much attention—they’re a reserved bunch, not like the rowdies at *Magnets*—and the actors don’t give them any action to observe. They don’t even bob the covers with their breath. The seats fill up in a near sell out—less the 60 chairs put back stage after the *Magnets* show. Ten minutes later the house is full and Matt lowers the lights.
Donna Frye’s office is her oasis. The 53-year-old San Diego councilwoman has decorated her bamboo-toned walls with framed photographs of her surf-champion husband, Skip, and ocean-blue folk art from the couple’s surf shop. Amidst the chaos of city bureaucracy, it’s her “sane place.” But today even the tranquil décor hasn’t insulated her.

It’s five weeks before San Diego’s 2004 mayoral election and Donna Frye’s supporters have been calling and e-mailing asking her to run. It’s easy, they say. All she needs to become the city’s first write-in mayor is an army of volunteers, a hundred thousand dollars and more than that many votes. All this in five weeks.

Earlier in the month, Frye’s fans just sought advice. They telephoned wanting to know who she was voting for. Her only reply: “I don’t know.” But this week the handful of calls has become two dozen a day; the solicitation of advice has become a call for action.

A few zealous admirers told her months ago to run for mayor, but she didn’t take that as public sentiment. Frye is many things to many different segments of San Diego—the city council’s most colorful member, a passionate environmentalist and the wife of a local legend. But the mayor’s office seems far fetched even for a dreamer like Frye. Now word has leaked that she’s considering, seriously considering, a run, and phones won’t stop ringing.

The Frye Rebellion
The blitz surprises Frye. For years, San Diego Democrats fingered her as one of the few progressives with grand promise in this generally conservative city, but this is different. This isn’t a few people on the fringe asking the impossible. This is a groundswell.

Frame shop-owner Hal Simon picks up his phone and dials Frye’s office thinking he’s the only person asking the councilwoman to join the race.

You need to run, he tells her.

Thanks for your support, she replies.

No, you really need to run. If you do I’ll do whatever it takes to get you elected.

As with so many earlier callers, Frye kindly thanks Simon and tells him she’ll consider his request over the weekend. On Monday, it is Simon’s phone that rings. Frye has decided to run, and she needs Simon to make good on his promise. She needs a lot of help and she needs it right now.

***

In the months before Frye joined the race, troubles besieged San Diego’s City Hall. First and worst were problems stemming from an underfunding of the city’s pension system—problems that would still plague the city months after the election. What sounds like a mundane municipal glitch had eroded the credibility of the city and many of its elected officials and employees. The problem began in
the early '90s when the city bet its retirees' pensions on the booming stock market.

The logic was simple: big market increases would keep the pension fund afloat so there was no need to fund it properly. But the plan failed when the dot-com bubble burst. Not only did the scheme fail, but the city hid its failure from the public. Only after a whistle-blower sounded the alarm did the public begin to understand how bad thing were. The Securities and Exchange Commission and the Justice Department began investigations that would continue well into 2005.

And there were more city scandals. San Diego endured a decade of migraines over its pro sports team—there were problems with ticket guarantees, ballpark bonds and rumored franchise buyouts. Then came a string of revenue shortfalls from a weak economy. And finally, three council members were indicted in 2003 on federal charges of taking bribes from a strip-club owner who wanted to repeal a “no touch” law.

As Mayor Dick Murphy campaigned for re-election, city affairs were at an embarrassing low—something County supervisor and three-time mayoral candidate Ron Roberts hoped to capitalize on. But to many voters, Roberts was a Murphy Xerox. Both men are white-haired, standard-issue Republicans who ran against each other in 2000 during the last mayoral run-off election and have big, wealthy bases of support in San Diego.

So, in late September, when Frye becomes a write-in candidate, neither Roberts nor Murphy seems to give it much thought—the buzz is that the two assume she'll spoil the race for the other. Certainly, not many give the surfer,
liberal and maverick a shot at victory. Most in the public and press think of her as an aging hippie with her long, bleach-blonde hair and tan sun-beaten face who is married to a famous surfer and who lives on the short end of 8-1 council votes.

But to those paying close attention to local politics, she’s known as the champion of the underdog. A decade ago, Frye went to battle against big corporations and entrenched politicians when her husband got sick after swimming in polluted San Diego waters. Since then she’s become famous for boycotting closed-door meetings to protest what she considers a culture of secrecy at City Hall and, because she understood the pension system was out of balance, was the sole council member to vote against increasing pension benefits. It was this incisive vote—a vote Murphy later said he regretted—that gave Frye the capital she needed to be a legitimate candidate.

* * *

High clouds hold off the heat of day as locals wander between vendors’ booths at the Mira Mesa Street Fair. Kids with balloons tied to their wrists wander in and out of the exhibit of decommissioned army tanks. A local martial arts club puts on a show of breaking concrete blocks with their fists and feet. Three adults dressed as Klingons from Star Trek pose for a community paper photo. The community organizers have invited all the usual street fair accomplices: girl scouts, face painters, school bands. This year, they’ve also invited Skip and Donna Frye.
As Frye and husband Skip pull up to the event—Skip at the wheel because Donna doesn’t drive—they don’t know what to expect. Earlier in the morning, the couple and a group of campaign volunteers began gathering the signatures the councilwoman needs to qualify as a certified write-in candidate. They began at Ralph’s supermarket in Clairemont and didn’t need to go far. So many Frye supporters showed up that volunteers had to run to the library and post office in search of copy machines to make more petitions. Some supporters even drove across town to navigate the crowded parking lot and sign for Frye.

But the San Diego neighborhood Mira Mesa isn’t cosmopolitan Clairemont, and, unlike Clairemont, Mira Mesa isn’t in Frye’s district. It’s a residential area populated with servicemen and their families from nearby Miramar Naval Air Station. Yet, Frye isn’t even out of the car before she’s spotted by two men who come running over asking to sign the petition. The men surprise her. People don’t cross the street to sign petitions in Frye’s experience. Usually, people hide from pens and clipboards.

In the couple of days since Frye publicly announced she was joining the race, it’s become evident she has plenty of help. Hal Simon—who pledged his time when he asked her to run a week ago—has handed the framing business over to his partner so he can volunteer fulltime. Along with Simon are more than 200 other volunteers—around 50 who have, like Simon, left their jobs to work days, nights and weekends for Frye.

But it’s Frye’s staff that offers her the greatest support, chiefly her campaign manager, Nicole Capretz, and campaign attorney, Marco Gonzalez.
Among her staff—mostly made up of old activist buddies—Frye has almost fanatical support.

Capretz will never forget first meeting Frye at a rally celebrating the anniversary of the Clean Water Act. Thrilled at meeting another environmental activist, another kindred spirit, Frye jubilantly grabbed Capretz and gave her a big hug. In Frye’s world, impromptu embraces are normal, but having just met the woman, Capretz didn’t know this. All she could think was: Who is this hippie chic?

Marco Gonzalez didn’t get a hug when he first met Frye, but he did get the same peace, love and justice vibe from her when he went to buy a surfboard from her husband at the couple’s surf shop. An environmental attorney just out of school, Gonzalez connected with the Fryes immediately. After the initial meeting he and Donna began to work together on clean water issues. Naturally, Gonzalez and Capretz pitched in when Frye decided to first run for public office.

In 2001, Frye campaigned for the District 6 seat after the sitting councilwoman resigned pleading guilty to accepting unreported gifts from the San Diego Padres owner. Frye ran against Republican Steve Danon—Ron Roberts’ former chief of staff and a frequent Republican campaign manager. Frye’s initial backers included a few small-business owners, retirees and environmentalists, while Danon—who raised more than twice the money Frye did—got support from the presidents of companies, developers, contractors, builders, lobbyists and Roberts’ substantial political network.
Frye’s victory shocked everyone but her most ardent supporters—she squeaked by with about 52 percent of the vote. Now, three weeks into her write-in campaign for mayor, Frye is faced with a decidedly more difficult race. But it’s nothing she can’t handle, says Gonzalez.

Gonzalez first heard rumblings of Frye’s idea to become a write-in candidate at his wedding reception in late September around the same time Frye’s office was buried in calls. Maybe it was the revelry surrounding his nuptials, but, at first he didn’t believe her. When they finally had a chance to sit and talk, he just wanted to know one thing.

“Are you in it to win it or are you in it to spoil it for someone else?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t drag you all in it if I just wanted to spoil it for someone else,” she replied.

* * *

On Saturday, October 9, less than a month before the election, Frye formally launches her write-in campaign. It’s been a week since she first gathered signatures and her momentum has grown. Surrounded by the panorama of Mission Bay Park, blue sky, royal palm trees, sea gulls calling loudly, Frye greets a few hundred cheering supporters. Here she outlines her platform in detail: an end of professional sports subsidies, a renewable-energy policy, a living wage and a host of other progressive and traditionally-futile causes in San Diego. While
Murphy and Roberts oppose distributing clean needles to drug users, Frye says the idea will reduce the spread of AIDS. While Murphy and Roberts support keeping the Boy Scout camp in a city park, Frye opposes the group because she says it discriminates against gays and atheists.

For those who haven’t been paying attention, Frye’s speech marks her as an enemy of the status quo. But along with emphasizing her rebel status, she constantly underscores her vote against forcing the pension fund into further imbalance—the main issue the media and public have latched on to.

“Today, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take back our city, and to restore the public trust and our city’s good name,” she tells the crowd. “We can’t wait 15 years to do something about our retirement system. We have to act now, to stop the drift and eliminate the excesses that have reduced our city’s contributions to the pension plan while increasing benefits.”

Three and half weeks before the election, Frye begins reeling in the city’s disconnected voters. But even with this spark of interest, she has little money and time to capitalize on it. She also has no political svengali to guide her, no help from the political consultants that swarm most big political campaigns, only freshman campaign manager Nicole Capretz.

Capretz knows television, radio and print ads are out—with less than $100,000 in the campaign’s coffers the ads are too costly. So she looks at the campaign through a grass-roots lens. What matters are the foot-soldiers and their devotion to the cause. Capretz sends volunteers like Simon to walk the streets, smile and try to infect the city with their enthusiasm. And it works. White-haired
grandmothers living on fixed incomes dash to contribute ten or twenty dollars. Every morning, during rush hour, volunteers wave signs and collect checks at busy intersections and highway on-ramps.

Color envelops the campaign. Frye wears bright suits, whimsical stories surround her, even her campaign posters vividly contrast the red, white and blue Roberts and Murphy signs—one of Frye’s placards is a pastel ocean blue with surfers in the background and an arm-in-arm couple walking the beach. The color reminds voters that Frye doesn’t represent politics as usual.

At one campaign event someone walks up to Frye and says, “You look just like my next door neighbor.” Her reply: “I am your next door neighbor.”

Capretz concentrates on free advertising. While the San Diego media shoots for balanced coverage, the national media mobs Frye. All the network morning shows come calling—Good Morning America, the Today Show and the Early Show. National Public Radio’s Morning Edition, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and, fittingly, Surfer Magazine all do features on her.

As the media gets hip to Frye, the political establishment joins the ride. The San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council dumps its endorsement of Murphy in favor of Frye. Notable local politicians United States Representative Bob Filner, Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins and a dozen others all back Frye.

As Frye picks up big endorsements, her opponents realize she’s more than just a spoiler; she’s a contender. And Roberts goes on the attack.

At a news conference outside City Hall on October 18, Roberts tries to convince the public that Frye and Murphy are two sides of the same coin. On an
oversized mock report card Roberts grades city officials failing on waste, fraud and corruption.

An example of Frye’s brilliant serendipity, she strolls by on her way to meet with the chamber of commerce. She stops and watches Roberts fill out the report card. The media—there for Roberts—quickly pick up on Frye’s amused, good-natured smile. The TV news and local papers spin the event for Frye. Her inability to seem nasty and her smile make Roberts’ event seem silly. It’s all part of the cliché the media has settled on: paint Frye as quixotic and her opponents as tried-and-true, but stale, gray politicians. She’s happy-go-lucky Gidget; they are gruff, grouchy and unhip.

As the election approaches, the popularity Frye built on bumper-stickers and color surges. The Friday before the election polls show Murphy with 31 percent, Roberts with 30 percent and Frye with 29 percent. Over the weekend polls shift toward Frye—she now has 30 percent, while Murphy and Roberts each have 27 percent. All that seems left is the write-in.

“The public knows how to write,” she says. “I am convinced that the citizens of San Diego are smart enough to figure out how to write ‘Frye’ on a little line and fill out a little oval.”

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Two dozen people cram into a room the size of a small coffee shop. But the tables and chairs in the San Diego County registrar’s office aren’t Seattle cool.
Here, it’s all strictly government issue, high school cafeteria-like. For a room so nondescript, there’s a lot of tension. It’s here that the registrar employees tally the mayoral election’s write-in votes.

Election officials divide the votes for Frye from the scores of votes for Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Arnold Schwarzenegger. And, because it’s San Diego, the handful of votes for Shamu the whale. An election official goes through all these joke ballots and rubber stamps them invalid, then two others officials initial the ballots—once on the left, once on the right—to certify their invalidity. When that’s done, the valid ballots are tallied using old fashion hash marks. Four checks and a slash. Four checks and a slash. Over and over again. It’s remarkably tedious work. 154,531 ballots examined by hand. But if it’s tedious for the election officials, it’s excruciating for the Frye campaign.

County registrar Sally McPherson gives Frye’s campaign some latitude when it comes to the written in names. “Donna F” is counted as a vote for Frye, as is “Donna,” “Frye” and even “Fry” without the “e.” McPherson decided that the law allows her to do this based on voter intent. However, she won’t count the ballot that reads “the blonde lady on City Council whose name I forget.” And she won’t count ballots without that little oval, or bubble, filled in.

This is a problem for Frye because 5,551 people didn’t get the message that they needed to fill in the bubble and so 5,551 ballots with “Donna Frye” written next to an unbubbled bubble are disqualified. If counted, these 5,551 ballots would make Frye mayor.
What began as an unprecedented month-long blaze of a campaign is drenched under a deluge of lawsuits. Everyday for four months—long after the tallying is over and Mayor Murphy is certified as the victor—San Diego’s newspapers update the public on the endless court proceedings.

There are lawsuits for Frye and suits against Frye. One challenges the illegitimacy of the unbubbled ballots and one challenges the legitimacy of allowing Frye into the race as a write-in candidate in the first place. While the city charter seems to prohibit write-in candidacies, the municipal code explicitly allows for write-in candidacies. Even though City Clerk Chuck Abdelnour certified Frye’s candidacy when she submitted her petitions with no complaints from Roberts or Murphy, angry voters threatened by Frye’s campaign have emerged to plead their case before the judicial system unsympathetic to Frye.

The situation is a mess. And try as they might, Frye’s Attorney Marco Gonzales and his allies can’t clean it up.

Gonzales isn’t surprised at the length of the drawn-out court proceedings. He was prepared for them. Even still, he’s a little stunned.

“The one thing I didn’t know was that the San Diego power establishment would do everything, would bend over backwards, to keep Donna out of the mayor’s seat,” he says.

Even after the campaign is long over and Frye’s relegated to a second place finish, after her campaign ends with a fizzle, Gonzales is proud of the effort.

“Before this election the general feeling was that she represents environmentalists or surfers or her own council district,” he says. “Her credibility
was always couched in terms of radical environmentalism. Now it’s nothing close to that. Now she is a bonafide force and a credible spokesperson for a huge part of the community.”

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It’s the first day of spring and Donna Frye pulls a chair out of the shade of her house into the sunlight. She’s finished with her day of city council work and needs a little private time in the sun. Lately, private time hasn’t been hard to find—the media that engulfed her for months no longer cares about her story—but there’s been a shortage of sunshine.

“There’s a revolution going on,” she says. “Times are changing and San Diego is never going to be the same.”

She speaks as if everyone in this city agrees with her. It’s been a few weeks since the latest appeal on her behalf—one to get the 5,551 votes counted—has been rejected. But Frye doesn’t appear defeated. She’s tired because her job is draining, but she’s not tired of fighting for the mayor’s office.

Even after a half dozen failed lawsuits, five fruitless weeks on the campaign trail, she retains her optimism. With every fight she’s ever been in she’s been the long shot, the vivid dark horse—her political campaigns, her trips to Washington, D.C. to lobby on behalf of the Pacific Ocean, her battle to create open and honest government in San Diego. Maybe it’s because she’s a disciple of the antiquated ’60s protest model, but she’s used to slow change.
Frye wants her supporters to be happy that she did so well and she hopes her campaign encourages other people to take on the system.

"It's not what I do or don't do, it's what they do, and they need to believe that they will make a difference," she says. "I just want them to make sure they know that."
Writing Narrative Journalism

Joseph Mitchell begins his story "The Old House at Home" this way:

McSorley's occupies the ground floor of a red-brick tenement at 15 Seventh Street just off Cooper Square, where the Bowery ends. It was opened in 1854 and is the oldest saloon in New York City. In eighty-eight years it has had four owners—an Irish immigrant, his son, a retired policeman, and his daughter—and all of them have been opposed to change.

It's a great way to begin a story—fiction or non-fiction. It's simple. It's specific. It's classic.

Mitchell, who published this story in The New Yorker in the '40s, uses elements of a traditional hard news lede and fills in as many of the 5-W's (Who, What, Where, When and why) as he can—this firmly grounds the reader in the story. But more importantly, Mitchell's lede lets us know we are in for a good yarn. Why? Because we have an interesting Who, What, Where and When: immigrants, cops and their progeny, a city's oldest bar, Manhattan and 1854 to 1942. And we have a hinted-at, teasing Why in the conflict brought up in the final clause—"all of them have been opposed to change."

Many great novels, short stories and narrative journalism pieces use openings similar to this one. In a single sentence or paragraph or page—depending on the scope of the story—the writer must grab readers, ground readers and let them know what's at stake. Once this is done, the only goal is to keep
them reading until the end of the story. Whether the writer is Aesop, Hemingway or Kapuscinski, keeping readers reading is done the same way—compelling scenes, action, dialogue and character. Because all stories are good for the same reasons, (compelling scenes, action, etc.) the techniques behind writing good journalism and fiction are the same.

This is how I approached my three narrative journalism feature stories: write short stories that actually happened.

This is also how I came up with my working definition of narrative journalism (short stories that actually happened). Now that I've finished the three features I realize it isn't entirely that simple. My definition fails because fiction and non-fiction are innately different.

Fiction is invented. Non-fiction depends on actual people and events, people and events that can't be tailored to fit a story. This makes the job of the narrative journalist tricky. My object is to tell the most compelling story I can without changing the facts to make my story more compelling. How can this be done? The answer comes in finding, not inventing, compelling stories and then discovering the compelling stories inside the stories (the most compelling scenes). One does this by finding a line of conflict. Even a story about something as interesting as the oldest bar in New York City won't work without a little conflict. Once a writer establishes a line of conflict, he or she must follow it with scenes and dialogue filled with dynamic characters that move the action forward and develop the conflict.

At least this is how it should work. It's not always this simple.
Libby, Montana

It was impossible for me *not* to find conflict in "Libby, Montana." The story is horrific; death and betrayal, scandal and sickness surround the town. Everyone in Libby has struggled, and everyone has a story worth hearing. With a story as sprawling as Libby's, I needed to find a narrow focus. This is why chose to frame my story around the premiere of Doug Hawes-Davis’s and Dru Carr’s documentary on the town.

In the premier I had a simple line of conflict—the town’s fractured reaction to the film. Like every other story written about Libby, I discuss how the W.R. Grace Corporation poisons the town with its asbestos production, but I tell only as much as needed to give the reader background, to ground the reader. By focusing on the premiere it was easy to decide which characters and scenes were needed: ones that built toward the tension surrounding the premiere.

Doug and Dru didn’t have to be major characters even though the piece is about the town’s reaction and relationship to their film. I could have made the story all about the town, but I wanted the two front and center because they added something unique to the piece. Doug and Dru were the only journalists who actively brought their finished product about Libby back to Libby. They took a chance doing this, but they didn’t realize how risky it was until they began setting up their DVD projector that night. Their mounting anxiety over how the film would be viewed by the town created a layer of tension that contrasted the
audience’s anxiety. I played Doug and Dru, the only aliens in the story, off the
townspeople. Doing this generated some of the best parts of my narrative, parts
that allowed me to step deeper into the implications of the event I was covering.
This is one of those parts:

Here, the filmmakers can’t cheat. Even if they know
more than the townspeople about certain twists in
the tale, they are still outsiders. The biography that
consumed them for four years will have a sort of
closure tonight, and it may be months, years, until
they return—if they ever return. For the 400 about
to watch themselves, this isn’t a final word, but
another page to turn.

Les Skramstad and Gayla Benefield represent two of the community’s
greatest fighters and two of the central characters in the film. For years, since the
tragedy began to come to light in 1999, Les and Gayla have been wrestling with
the government and the Grace company for help. They’ve also wrestled with the
town over how to deal with the tragedy and fought for their own and their
families’ health while battling asbestosis. This is why I chose them as the story’s
main townspeople.

The tragedy has so consumed Les and Gayla and their families that they
spend most of their free time raising money or awareness. It may look like I just
got lucky catching them in moments of battle, but they are so embroiled in their
cause that it would have been hard to find a time when they weren’t calling
politicians or organizing letter-writing campaigns.
I knew Les would be making his calls, and I planned to observe him when he did make the calls. But I had no idea Gayla would be stuffing envelopes for the mailing campaign or that her brother-in-law would be in the hospital. But as I spent time with Gayla I realized that this was her life—praying for sick relatives and writing politicians. Again, I got the sense that it would have been hard to find a moment with Gayla that wasn’t related to asbestosis. So I tried to write the scene like there was nothing exceptional about it.

I tried to evoke the everydayness with this paragraph:

Gayla toils methodically. It’s work she’s used to. Letter writing campaigns, petitions, phone calls to the EPA, politicians, reporters. She piles the envelopes in tall stacks that sag precariously at the top like trees laden with snow. She chats with her mother-in-law paying more attention to her letters than the conversation.

One thing that added to the normality of the scene was the presence of Gayla’s mother-in-law, Leona. Now this was just good luck—especially because her presence made this a principal scene. Leona’s presence illuminated the family’s character and gave me a relationship I didn’t yet have in the story. It also created a place for great dialogue, which is really what allowed me to make it a scene.

With Les I knew that there would be dialogue because he was spending six hours on the phone pleading with a dozen politicians. The fact that it was one-sided dialogue didn’t matter, the one-sided nature of it actually added to the desperation of the scene.
“Good afternoon, I’d like to speak to Denise. Is this Denise? Hi, this is Les Skramstad up in Libby. Well, I got a request for you. Are you up to making another trip to Libby tonight? Yeah. Yeah. Well, we-”

In this scene it’s easy for the reader to infer the stock responses at the other side of the line. It added action and tension. But with Gayla quietly stuffing envelopes there wasn’t enough action or tension to occupy readers. Leona’s nervous nails clicking on her coffee cup and her worried prattling filled out the scene making it read more like fiction.

Dialogue is a great tool for so many reasons, but it’s rarely used in journalism because so much of journalism is a source responding to questions the reader never hears. The result is—not dialogue—but little soliloquies void of action or intensity. But here I had an opportunity to reveal my characters through their own words—a technique cherished by fiction writers. Even in their short, clipped exchanges, Gayla and Leona revealed so much.

“Do you want to go and see the film tonight?”
“Oh, well. I might,” replies Leona.
“You’ve gotta wear a long dress,” says Gayla smiling. “It’s a premiere.”
“Well, I haven’t got a long dress.” Gayla laughs her deep, rattling laugh again.
“I’m the star you know.” Leona nods and clicks on her coffee cup some more.
“Did they say when Don will be home?” she asks Gayla.
Two things revealed in this exchange are Gayla’s inability to be broken by the tragedy and Leona’s inability to forget that her son is in surgery 200 miles away. But the snippet of dialogue also reveals bigger things. It mirrors so much of what Gayla’s story is about. Gayla’s teasing her mother-in-law about wearing a dress to the premiere and Leona’s worry creates a role reversal. Gayla becomes the adult, the one in charge, just like she has done for so many in her community as the de facto leader on so many asbestosis issues.

This story succeeds because I accomplished my goal of having it read like a short story. It does have a nutgraph section—all my stories follow the same pattern of lede, nutgraph then a series of scenes; or narrow focus, wide focus, narrow focus—but the nutgraph doesn’t take the reader out of the narrative flow. The form may be predictable, but I love this form. And I think there’s a reason it’s so popular: it works.

The key to it working is imagining the second section not as a traditional nutgraph, but as scene that gives the reader a bird’s eye view of the whole story. In Chicago Tribune reporter Louise Kieman’s story “Howling Windows Signals Skyscraper’s Fatal Flaw,” she illustrates how effective pulling back in a second section is. Kieman begins her story about a broken pane of glass that falls and kills a bystander like this:

The glass falls like a shadow, swift and silent, a dark blur swooping through the wet sky.
For weeks, the cracked window on the 29th floor of the CNA building strained against the adhesive film that held it in place 340 feet above the ground, expanding almost imperceptibly in the heat.
of the afternoon sun, contracting with the nighttime chill. Cracks slowly crept across its surface, pieces pushing and pulling with each gust of wind. 

Now, a fragment breaks free. It is a jagged triangle, no larger than a cafeteria tray, dark with dirt on one side, covered with white film on the other.

This is pure scene. It’s a specific moment in time, a specific event, a great opening. But for Kiernan’s second section she pulls the camera back because she wants the reader to understand the broader context of the story. This is how she begins the second section:

Skyscrapers seem solid, immutable, as blank and indestructible as mountains. But buildings sway in the wind, they settle, they crumble, they corrode. Sometimes, they cast off pieces of themselves like so much ballast.

Two weeks ago, eight large chunks of limestone smashed onto LaSalle Street from the 36th floor of an office building, damaging four cars. In 1998, a 15-foot section of terra cotta at the building that houses the Shubert Theatre tumbled into an alley on Halloween, not long after the crowd returned from intermission. A woman walking along Michigan Avenue was hurt in January 1999 when a piece of brick dropped 15 stories from the Carbide and Carbon Building and hit her in the head.

No one can say precisely how often these incidents happen, but they do: at least half a dozen times in the past three years. And when they happen, the city's skyscrapers, the towers that Chicago invented and refined, become threatening giants, brooding over the streets below.

The voice is still intact. Kiernan is clearly still telling a tale—but she’s also giving the reader facts, specifics, context. This is how I wanted my second sections to read: distant, but still locked into a narrative voice.
The Cliffs Notes to Buntport Theatre

After reporting and writing "Libby" I looked for a story that had nothing to do with death or politics or environmental disasters. I wanted something different and writing about a theater company seemed different—it also seemed fun and easy. I thought all I needed to do was hangout for a week and observe: a cinema verité approach. But I quickly realized this wouldn't work. The characters and scenes were so strange that no reader would understand them without a frame. So again I needed a line of conflict.

Here's one of the places my narrative-journalism-is-a-short-story-that-actually-happened theory fell flat. I had to look closely for conflict, but I couldn't invent it (which would have been a lot easier). Also, once I found the conflict in the company's attempt to escape the shadow of their staged situation comedy, I had to paint the conflict fairly. The shadow of the sit-com was a problem that clearly bothered everyone in the company, but it wasn't a gnaw-at-your-soul conflict.

To follow my line of conflict I had to carefully pick which stories to tell. This was tough because there was so much material to whittle down. I spent almost sixty hours over six days with Buntport. I saw them perform, rehearse, fool around, eat lunch, drink beer, smoke cigarettes, listen to music, clean up, build sets and sleep. I had two dozen scenes—most of which, although amusing, I deleted because they didn't further the conflict.
In a short story of this length there would never be five protagonists. But again, this isn’t fiction. There were five players in Buntport so there had to be five characters in my story. To help readers keep them straight I did my best to clearly mark them and then return to their markings as often as possible without overdoing it.

The show is made up of two one-act plays and features four of Buntport’s five players: There’s the Camel Light-smoking, gum-popping Hannah Duggan; the redhead with lush eyelashes and a flapper-hair do, Erin Rollman; the short, enthusiastic Brian Colonna; and Erik Edborg, the tall Swede who looks like Jim Carrey on a low dose of Valium. Evan Weissman, the newest member of the troupe, who in Adidas and beard looks more like a soccer player than a thespian, is the only Buntport actor not in the show...

This introduction-by-list wouldn’t have worked in my other stories, but I think it works here. The idea was to mimic Buntport’s playfulness in my tone. Although I didn’t fully embrace the madcap feel of Buntport—I thought adopting too much of a playful style would take away from story telling—I tried to have my style mirror my subject matter whenever I thought it would work. This balancing act wasn’t easy.

The following piece of dialogue represents one place I had trouble with the equilibrium:

“She doesn’t believe that she’s wrong,” says Erin Rollman batting her lashes.
“I know she doesn’t,” says Brian. “I can see it in her eyes.”
Erik giggles.
“Matt corrected you last time,” Erin says turning to Hannah and at the same time gesturing to Matt who is quietly eating Wendy’s in the tech booth. “Do you not remember when he did?”
Matt keeps his head down and chews.
“Oh, my god whatever,” shouts Erin. “Someone go get a fucking script.”

This scene is complicated. A number of characters speak in rapid succession. It’s difficult to tell what’s going on: Are they mad at each other? Are they fooling around? Or both? My object was to help readers understand how confusing it was without confusing them.

I did this by trying to slow the action down and by explaining upfront that things are confusing. That’s the purpose of this sentence: “The piece’s pace—about ten gags per minute (a few of which are in Old English)—makes it more challenging than the slower, character-driven bother.” I think I do a decent job at making clear what’s going on, but in hindsight I think it would have made more sense to pick a less chaotic scene to illustrate how chaotic Buntport is.

By contrast, I think the argument over which band is better, The Who or Led Zeppelin, is perfect. It doesn’t do much to further the plot or expand the conflict and it may go on too long, but, other than the lede, it’s the only scene where I give a character plenty of space to really run around. This explosion shows the reader the world Buntport
occupies. This is the land of Quentin Tarantino and heavy metal, comic books and vaudeville.

By the time the argument rolls around the story is winding down. It’s been a long time since we saw the cast kicking like Rockettes and singing in bawdy Guys and Dolls style and Brian mounting the table to belt out “Cuz’ I steal the shooooow!” I felt I needed to remind the reader that Buntport isn’t doing Beowulf, rather the company is doing an adaptation of the Cliff’s Notes of Beowulf. In just a few lines, I remind the reader how pop culture oriented this group is and how wild they are.

“The Who are fucking insane. Keith Moon is fucking insane, and Pete Townsend is fucking insane, and they blew all that shit up and now all the punk bands are trying to imitate them but they can’t get it right so I’m telling you that The Who is totally fucking insane.” He catches his breath; Brian and Matt are elated. Evan’s rants always take the edge off before a show. “Zeppelin rocks fun and rocks cool and rocks shit and rocks sex, but as a better band you have to take The Who.”

“Buntport” is not as good as “Libby” but it was more difficult to write. There were too many characters and a murky conflict, and when faced with a similar story in the future, I hope I can improve on what I did here. But I still learned how to boil down a week into 4,000 words—I spent less than half that time in Libby and came up with almost twice as many words. “Buntport” taught me about balancing an economy of language with paralleling style and subject matter.
The Frye Rebellion

After two features (and two years of classes and two years at the Independent), the final story should have been the easiest. It wasn’t. The reason was simple: reconstructed narrative is exponentially more difficult than observational narrative.

Usually I follow the begin-every-story-with-a-scene rule—I began “Libby, Montana” with Les making phone calls and “The Cliff’s Notes to Buntport Theatre” with the company performing its sit-com. But initially I broke this rule with “The Frye Rebellion,” and it was a mistake. Here is my original lede:

It’s five weeks before San Diego’s mayoral election and Donna Frye’s supporters have a simple request. They want her to run. It’s easy, they say. All she needs to become the city’s first write-in mayor is an army of volunteers, a hundred thousand dollars and more than that many votes. All this in five weeks.

I felt I needed to begin the story by dramatically telling—not showing—the readers who Frye is and what was at stake. I thought I had to do this for a number of reasons. First, I thought a single scene couldn’t sum up such a long, intricate story. Second, I thought a single scene couldn’t sum up the impact of the story. Third, because 95 percent of the story is reconstructed from interviews, photographs and news clippings, I thought I didn’t have a scene detailed or forceful enough to begin with. But my reasoning was all wrong.
I became hung up on the fact that my reconstructed scenes weren’t as solid or fleshy as my observed scenes in “Libby” and “Buntport.” I thought that it was OK to have a more boring opening because it was reconstructed. I should have remembered Associated Press writer Julia Prodis’ reconstructed narrative “Dying for Love.”

This is how Prodis begins her story about a suicide pact between three junior high kids:

The trooper’s blue lights flashed in the rearview mirror. Peck floored it, Josh grabbed the revolver, and Jenny, curled up beside him in the back seat, looked frantically out the back window.

They were far from home on this desolate Arkansas highway. It was the middle of the night and the time had come for the best friends to fulfill their pact: If caught by police, the boys, just 15, and Jenny, 12, would commit suicide.

They had it all planned -- or so they thought -- days ago. Josh would shoot Jenny first. (She didn’t have the guts to do it herself and, if she was going to die, she wanted Josh to do it.) He would shoot Peck next, then kill himself.

They were rocketing faster than 100 mph in their stolen Grand Prix and the trooper was closing in. Just ahead, Peck saw a big rig blocking the only open lane in a construction zone. They were trapped. It was time.

Peck slowed to a stop 20 feet behind the truck. Josh cocked the gun, turned to Jenny and looked deep into her green eyes.

“I love you,” he said, and kissed her.

“Close your eyes.”

At the conclusion of “Dying for Love” both boys are dead so Prodis reconstructed this scene using only interviews with Jenny and the police. What makes this so amazing are a few things. First, she does almost no conjecture.
Maybe "looked deep" and "looked frantically" are educated guesses, but everything else is verifiable fact. Phrases like "Peck floored it," "They were far from home on this desolate Arkansas highway," and "They were rocketing faster than 100 mph in their stolen Grand Prix and the trooper was closing in" can all be backed up with a little observation at the scene of the crime and a look at the police record.

Frye’s story isn’t a junior high suicide pact, but it is compelling. Being drafted by hundreds of citizens to run for mayor as a write-in in five weeks is amazing, but it doesn’t have the intense dramatic moment that "Dying for Love" has. I couldn’t model my lede on Prodis’, but what I could take from her, and from Joseph Mitchell, was the knowledge that fleshy details are better to begin with than abstract exposition. I needed to remember to grab readers, ground readers and let them know what’s at stake.

So I slowed down the scene to acclimate readers to who Frye was—to ground them. Here’s what I came up with:

Donna Frye’s office is her oasis. The San Diego councilwoman has decorated her bamboo-toned walls with framed photographs of her surf-champion husband, Skip, and ocean-blue folk art from the couple’s surf shop. Amidst the chaos of city bureaucracy, it’s her “sane place.” But today even the tranquil décor hasn’t isolated her.

It’s five weeks before San Diego’s mayoral election and Donna Frye’s supporters have been calling and e-mailing asking her to run. It’s easy, they say. All she needs to become the city’s first write-in mayor is an army of volunteers, a hundred thousand dollars and more than that many votes. All this in five weeks.
It's a small change of wording, but a significant change in the tone and rhythm of the story. Instead of starting quickly and then slowing down, I begin slowly and speed up. Then, in the next section, I allow myself some exposition to fill the readers in on the backstory.

Because I didn't observe anything first hand it was difficult to map the turning points in the conflict. I had to do a dozen interviews and read a stack of newspaper stories even before I settled on the scenes that would make up my story. Then I had to go back and reinterview everyone about the scenes. I had to go to the locations of the scenes—Mira Mesa, Mission Bay, City Hall and the elections office—and try to imagine what it would have been like during my events. Through a lot of driving, reading and interviewing, I built my scenes.

This frustrated me because it seemed that the scenes weren't dominant enough. Eventually I realized that a certain amount of exposition was needed in this story—a much greater amount than in my previous features. I also realized that it wasn't reconstructed narrative that was at fault for this dependence on exposition.

One thing that makes "Dying for love" so good is that it's short and simple. First, it can only be written through reconstruction. Second, there are so few scenes and characters that the reconstruction is easy—it takes place over a few days and there is only one chief witness to the event, Jenny, and a few minor witnesses. The Frye story is more cumbersome. With a story as long and detailed, bureaucratic and litigious as Frye's, I had to explain much more of what
transpired between my scenes. If this story was all scenes it would be fifty pages—forty of which would be dominated by recounts and court proceedings (not the most compelling reading).

That’s not to say that I wasn’t satisfied with many parts of the story. I crafted as strong a lede as was possible, and I structured and paced the story well. I also think that certain scenes are reconstructed with great detail and force. I’m particularly proud of this section’s opening:

High clouds hold off the heat of day as locals wander between vendors’ booths at the Mira Mesa Street Fair. Kids with balloons tied to their wrists wander in and out of the exhibit of decommissioned army tanks. A local martial arts club puts on a show of breaking concrete blocks with their fists and feet. Three adults dressed as Klingons from Star Trek pose for a community paper photo.

Another area of difficulty was not siding with or against Frye. I wanted to show what an amazing person Frye is without specifically endorsing her politics—to me, Frye is a character first and a politician second. I did this by distinguishing her from her competitors by revealing her character and not just labeling her politically. Instead of differentiating her by constantly referring to her as a Democrat or a liberal, I described her appearance, disposition and actions.

Although “Frye” was the toughest story, I’m glad I wrote it because I learned some important lessons. Most importantly, I learned that reconstructing isn’t my favorite thing to do, but it can work if one doesn’t give up on it. I was ready to give up on my lede until I made another trip to Frye’s office. It was this
final trip, once the story was written and interviews were done, that gave me the
good to observe details ("her bamboo-toned walls") I missed earlier. From this
one ten-minute visit I was able to improve my whole story.

Here’s the lesson I offer other narrative journalists. While there is no
substitute for observing an event as it happens, narrative reconstruction works as
long as you don’t give up on it. If the object is to mimic the tone of fiction, then
take the extra trip back to the sight of the event, make the extra call to get that one
missing detail. Good writing is built out of great details so make sure you know
the make of the car, the address where the shooting took place or the name, age
and breed of the protagonist’s dog.