A New Kind of Writing?

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Original link

There are two kinds of nonfiction: *science writing* and *journalism*. Science writing is when you're trying to explain an idea. You have a concept in your head and you try to get it across. There are lots of tools you can use to do this: you can give an example, you can tell the story of how you thought of it, you can draw a picture. But the concept is the important thing.

In journalism, you're telling a story. Someone did one thing, which led to something else, which led to this other thing. Occasionally you pause to take a step back and make some larger point: the story might have some moral or illustrate some larger principle or lead you to a conclusion. But the important thing is always the story.

Of course, this is how science advances. Something weird happened over here, so we measured it carefully and took detailed notes. (These are the experimentalists.) When you put all these weird things together, they kind of fit a larger pattern. (These are the theorists.) The theory then leads to more experiments and the new experiments lead to more theory. You inch forward, bouncing between experiment and theory, journalism and science writing, to a larger understanding of the world.

But, of course, just as science requires both, the best science writing requires both. This is what makes *This American Life*'s show "The Giant Pool of Money" still so unsurpassedly brilliant. It took a question everyone wanted to know the answer to — why did the economy melt down? — and explained it not by just illustrating the concepts, as many science writers did, or just telling stories of the people involved, as journalists did, but by doing *both*, moving between the two modes so you could understand not just the theory but how it worked.

It seems like an obvious idea, especially when you lay it out this way, but I really can't think of any other good examples. Take three of my very favorite books: Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes*, Robert Karen's *Becoming Attached*, and William Foote Whyte's _Street Corner Society_[1]. All are absolutely brilliant, among the best examples of the genre while conveying facts of incredible importance. Jackall is very cinematic: his book consists of well-chosen scenes and all the theory comes in the cuts between them. (As soon as I finished reading it, I wanted to turn it into a movie.) But the two — scenes and theory — exist in a weird sort of balance. Neither of them (with a few exceptions) really take over and drive the work the way both do in "The Giant Pool of Money" but instead they water each other down: the scenes are always illustrating a theory and the theory consists largely of scenes.

Karen embeds the theory within his story by telling the story of the theory's development. Because he does this without condescension, it's as good an introduction to the science as can be imagined. It's a very clever technique, and a very powerful one (I certainly wouldn't change it), but it's a different one and doesn't have the same power.

Whyte, by contrast, spends his book telling the story of one example. From it, he draws out all the important theoretical principles (basically inventing every major branch of sociology for the next century) but the theory is always illustrating his one story, just as Jackall's scenes are always illustrating his theory.

Malcolm Gladwell probably comes closest to a genuine mixture of the two, but his work is marred by the fact that he kind of makes up all his science. His stories are never illustrating some established scientific principle or even a new one he has that he wants to stand up to scrutiny, but instead his principles are always invented *ad hoc* to serve his stories, with the same fidelity a typical *This American Life* episode has to its theme. As Ira Glass comments on "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg": "the article could be half the length and still hit all its big ideas, and it's only longer because Gladwell has found so many things that interest and amuse him, and that's the engine that drives the whole enterprise. … pretty much everything in the story after section five is, to my way of thinking, just there for fun."

As I've hinted at before, I'm hard at work on a book of my own, and of course I plan to write it this way. But surely I can't be the first. Anyone else have any good examples?

UPDATE: I'd forgotten how good a book *Fast Food Nation* is. It follows almost exactly this style. In general, it seems larger books written by magazine writers might, since magazine articles (story, story, moment of reflection) are the building blocks of the form, but I'm still having trouble thinking of other examples. *Outliers* is *much* better than the other Gladwell books on this front.

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1. I wanted to say Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* for the alliteration, but Whyte really is a better example because he doesn't study an extreme outlier.