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When Action is Too Much and Not Enough: A Study of Mode in Narrative Journalism

“Have you read both of these? How are they different?” I asked my bookseller in Baltimore, referring to two new releases, both about the same series of events, written by authors with similar backgrounds, and with generally the same audience in mind.

Living in the city, I already knew the broad outline of the crimes that led to *I Got A Monster: The Rise and Fall of America’s Most Corrupt Police Squad* (St. Martin’s 2020) by Baynard Woods and Brandon Soderberg and *We Own This City: A True Story of Crime, Cops, and Corruption* (RandomHouse, 2021) by Justin Fenton. They both told the story of The Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF), a police unit so corrupt, you’d be hard-pressed to believe it if the plot line had shown up on the HBO show *The Wire*. Led by Baltimore Police Sergeant Wayne Jenkins, the GTTF had not only been violating the constitution when they made illegal stops to purportedly seize guns and make arrests, they had been planting guns and drugs on suspects, robbing drug dealers, selling drugs, and falsifying police reports. An FBI investigation and wiretaps eventually led to the arrest of the whole force, and guilty pleas or verdicts from all the members of the GTTF. With the same subject, the same distance in time from the crimes, the same available source material, the same audience in mind (both books are trade nonfiction, written for a white audience) and

similar perspectives (the authors are also all white men, who have been long-time crime reporters in Baltimore city), where did the books diverge?¹

“I’ve heard that *I Got a Monster* reads like a novel and *We Own This City* is more like journalism,” one of the employees at the store told me. I wondered what it meant when a reader designated a nonfiction book as written “like a novel” or “like journalism.” After reading both books, I understood that they both had roots in the nonfiction novels of the 1970s and New Journalism, and that in fact, *I Got a Monster* had swift pacing and vivid scenes while *We Own This City* used more exposition. I also knew that *I Got a Monster* received less attention than *We Own This City* (which is being dramatized for an HBO show, and was reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*), and wondered why Fenton’s writing “like journalism” might have more appeal than *I Got a Monster*.

Nonfiction novel and New Journalism aren’t well defined terms (more on that later), which left me wondering what particular craft techniques the reader picks up on to make a distinction between “like a novel” and “like journalism.” But more importantly, I wondered what the result for the reader is—the impact of the book, the perception of real events that transpired—when a writer chooses one style over the other. Karen Babine’s “[A Taxonomy of Nonfiction; Or the Pleasures of Precision](#)” provides a framework to compare and contrast the books and answer these questions. She outlines a system of literary classification modeled on Carl Linnaeus’s system for organizing how all living things are related. The largest rank (equivalent to a domain or kingdom) is genre, which Babine breaks down into nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama. Below that are subgenres (“science, travel, nature, food, historical, etc.”), which are not limited to one of the genres and can overlap. Then comes the form, which is perhaps akin to family in biological taxonomy and exists only within the genre. “Forms have parameters and can be

¹ The writers all assume the reader should be shocked by the actions of the GTTF. Reading D. Watkins “Only A Mile And A Big World Separated Us An All-American Story Of Two Boys From The East Side Of Baltimore” (Huffpost, May 13, 2020), the reader understands that for Black Baltimoreans, the crimes are not shocking, but a part of their everyday life. “[GTTF member Danny Hersl] stood for all the abuses and evils the BPD committed against me and my family,” Watkins writes at the top of the piece.

reproduced,” Babine writes, and gives examples of memoir, journalism, essay, flash, etc. People may be tempted to put essay, memoir, or journalism in the genre category, but as Babine points out, we get a much more precise understanding of writing as a craft when these are forms, not genres. So the form of these two books, I believe, is journalism, and in fact not narrative journalism or literary journalism, since those qualifiers demand a mode of writing (i.e. journalism written in a narrative or literary manner).² The next taxonomic rank is mode (what I think of as equivalent of genus in Linneaus’s system), or “what creates the energy and momentum of the page.”³ The author creates a path that the reader travels down through the story itself (narrative mode), language used (lyric mode), or the activity of “the writer’s brain” (essay mode). It is in this rank where *I Got a Monster* and *We Own This City* diverge; where one relies on the story to drive the action, the other relies more on the writer’s quest for answers.

I had intentionally written my first nonfiction book, *Flowers in the Gutter: The True Story of the Edelweiss Pirates, Teenagers Who Resisted the Nazis*, like a thriller using techniques taken from fiction writing—à la the nonfiction novel of Norman Mailer or more recently, Erik Larson. Although this partially stemmed from it being targeted to young adults (who definitely don’t want to read boring history), I also just wanted to propel readers through the narrative, on-the-ground as the action was happening, as if they could have been my main characters. I built the chapters on scenes and reconstructed dialog based on Gestapo reports, memoirs, oral histories, and interviews done by others (all of the people I wrote about had died by

² I want to add that nonfiction cop shop and crime writing does not need to be tied to journalism as a form; Alex Marzano-Lesnevich’s *The Fact of a Body: A Murder and a Memoir* and Natasha Threthewey’s *Memorial Drive: A Daughter’s Memoir* are two recent examples where the form is memoir, but with a crime subgenre. Books about cops and crimes are often described as being taken “from the headlines” and journalism—writing with some element of newsworthiness, probably about recent events—does often conform to what writers are trying to do when they write in the cop shop or crime subgenres.

³ Babine’s final taxonomic level is what she calls shape, how the subject matter relates to its form and how the text can be represented visually. The shape of these two books is outside the scope of this essay.

the time I started working on the book). The sentences and chapters are short, and I bounce between characters, allowing me to leave them at a critical moment and create suspense.

In order to keep a close third-person perspective and the action flowing, my editor and I also made the decision to take out anything that my main characters would not have known at the time—sometimes it wouldn't be until decades later that the inner machinations of the Nazi party were revealed. However, we both recognized that the narrative wouldn't work without that context. I pulled that information out and put it into present-tense, second-person introductions at the beginning of each part of the book, letting the reader in on events that the Pirates might not have known about. Interspersed throughout are primary source documents, including translations of Gestapo reports and arrest records. It is not until the last section that I use the first person to discuss the political and social factors that led to the Edelweiss Pirates being branded bad kids rather than Nazi resisters. Some people love this approach and style; both adults and teens have told me that they couldn't put the book down. Others have said they "don't like the writing," perhaps because it doesn't read like nonfiction should.

Authors get to choose how to tell a story, and if two books about the same subject come out around the same time, (to oversimplify) they usually have fundamental differences, such as a [trade press versus academic publisher](#) or [focus on different aspects of an important event](#) or person. *I Got a Monster* and *We Own This City* have none of these differences. In fact, they would be closely related in Babine's taxonomy, with the same genre, subgenre, and form: nonfiction, cop shop/ crime, and journalism. You could also say are both nonfiction crime novels or New Journalism, but if all of these classifications are the same, and yet the authors do not tell the story of the GTTF in the same way, where is their difference? Babine's taxonomy provides a framework to analyze the ways the authors approached the story of the GTTF and chose to write about it. Because all of the other taxonomic classifications are the same, we can narrow in on mode. *I Got a Monster* relies on the narrative mode, closely following actions to keep the reader engaged—the what and when of the story. *We Own This City* relies on essay mode, where the energy

of the book comes from Fenton guiding the reader through not the action, but what he is learning about the city and the police force—the how and why of the story. And their two diverging paths, the change in mode, ultimately lead the reader to two different places: one emotional with excitement and one cerebral with a development of insights.

A Consideration of Narrative Journalism

Narrative, *literary*, and *new* are all descriptors that have been put in front of journalism to describe the style of nonfiction writing that many credit Tom Wolfe with defining and journalists at during the second half of the 20th century as championing. James E. Murphy wrote in 1974 that Wolfe and the other New Journalists employed “scene-by-scene construction, full record of dialogue, third-person point of view, and the manifold incidental details to round out a character (i.e., descriptive incidentals)” (6), which, as Lee Gutkind explained in the third issue of *Fourth Genre*, was different because most “people regarded nonfiction as academic...or journalistic...” even though these techniques in nonfiction were in fact not new or “revolutionary” (201).

Since 1972, others have added to Wolfe’s definition. Murphy contends that New Journalism “qualifies as a *literary genre* because of its utilization of dramatic fictional techniques” and journalism “because it applies these techniques to reporting events” (35). Lee Gutkind added “first-person point of view” (201) to one of the characteristics of the genre. In the first chapter of *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction* (1995), Norman Sims writes that literary journalism “focuses on everyday events that bring out the hidden patterns of community life as tellingly as the spectacular stories that make newspaper headlines” (3), which was not a commandment for the New Journalists (see “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold”). He also notes that “*The Literary Journalists* broadened the set of characteristics [from Wolfe’s] to include immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation” (9).

Others have removed the focus from specific narrative techniques. In Volume 1 of *Literary Journalism Studies*, editor John C. Harstock posited that literary journalism is “the symbiosis of narrative and descriptive modalities,” (5) without specifying the tools of fiction used. Sims also quotes editor Richard Todd as saying, “Voice and story are the only tools,” where story includes narrative techniques and intellectual substance and voice “advances the feeling of something created, sculpted, authored by a particular spirit” (9). In *Good Prose*, Todd and co-author Tracy Kidder don’t focus on specific techniques at all, but instead explore how story, point of view, characters, and structure make up a nonfiction narrative. These definitions of journalism are broad and at times messy. In “Mapping Nonfiction Narrative: A New Theoretical Approach to Analyzing Literary Journalism,” William Roberts and Fiona Giles try to contend with this. They acknowledge generic definitions, but write, “[N]o theory will ever be complete or methodologically adequate until finer distinctions are made between several subcategories of texts” (102).

Two subcategories they discuss are Ethnographic Realism (ER) and Cultural Phenomenology (CP), as developed by David L. Eason. Cultural Phenomenology is “associated with reflective, exploratory, and essentially personal forms of literary journalism” (102) and “makes observation—grounded in an epistemology and an ethics—a vital part of the story” (104) and Babine might consider these forms, rather than subcategories. On the other end of the spectrum, Ethnographic Realism texts “have an omniscient narrator and utilize literary techniques associated with social realism” (102) and the narrative needs more than “the scene and the actors’ experiences,” it needs “a social, cultural, or historical framework” (104). They use David Simon’s *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (Houghton Mifflin, 1991) as an example, where Simon writes from the perspective of the Baltimore police detectives in close third person using colloquialisms and staccato statements and no direct quotations when relating inner thoughts (110). However, even Ethnographic Realism and Cultural Phenomenology as subcategories don’t provide enough distinctions in journalism. *I Got a Monster* and *We Own This City* (as descendants of *Homicide*) are both on the Ethnographic Realism side of the spectrum. Although as reporters they could place themselves within

the action unfolding (which Fenton does briefly when he receives a tip related to the death of a Baltimore police officer), they don't. Instead, they write in the "omniscient authorial voice" using the ER techniques of social realism like scene building and dialog. Describing the books as Ethnographic Realism Journalism still isn't enough to distinguish how and why they are different.

Subverting the Subgenre

In order to examine the modes of these two books and how they result in two very different books, I first want to explore what defines these as being (subverted) cop shop/crime journalism. Cop shop books usually have cops in the role of good guy, while crime stories focus on murder (usually of women). Both books fall into these subgenres and subvert them, but *I Got A Monster* falls more into the crime subgenre while *We Own This City* is more in the cop shop subgenre. In Simon's *Homicide*, he embeds with Baltimore detectives trying to solve homicides in a city plagued (then and now) by gun violence and in writing, takes on their voices. In "True and True(r) Crime: Cop Shops and Crime Scenes in the 1980s," Christopher P. Wilson explains that *Homicide* inspired similar cop shop books at a time when the true crime genre was expanding (including through the influence of TV shows like *America's Most Wanted* and *COPS*), offering readers "evocations of the modern American underside." By nature, cop shop is closely tied to crime. However, the authors also subvert crime conventions because of the type of crime they focus on. Wilson writes, "True Crime is clearly a murder-based genre; it overemphasizes female victims, older victims, and—intriguingly—white offenders and white victims" (719). In both books, there is no murder victim. Instead, a white police sergeant leads a predominantly Black unit as they commit crimes where the victims are predominantly Black men.

Like Simon, Fenton, Woods and Soderberg are all white male veteran crime reporters in Baltimore familiar with what Wilson defines as the "cop shop," namely, "those police precinct bureaus that have, for over a century, typically provided the site of crime reporting" (719-720). Cop shop typically focuses on the

police as heroes. *Homicide* was very much set in a time and place, “drafted from the headlines of the late 1980s: inner-city neighborhoods devastated by poverty, drug use, gang warfare, and record-setting homicide rates,” as Wilson points out (718-719). The public perception of police and policing has radically changed in the thirty years since *Homicide* was first published. Taking place in the late 2010s, the story of the GTTF is intertwined with the Black Lives Matter movement, police murders of unarmed Black men and women, calls for police to wear body cameras and be held accountable for their actions, and the uprising after Freddie Gray’s death following his arrest by the Baltimore City Police Department in 2015.⁴

Furthermore, although the action of both books takes place at police headquarters and in unmarked cop cars, *I Got a Monster* and *We Own This City* must subvert the subgenre since the police within the cop shop are also the criminals. Published into a context that saw the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent conviction of his killers, these books exist in a particular time and readerly consciousness. A reader need only look at the cover to know this: *I Got a Monster*’s subtitle references the “most corrupt police squad” and *We Own This City*’s dust jacket refers to the GTTF as “a gang of criminal cops.” Readers are very familiar with the concept of corrupt cops.

So, someone else has to be the “good guy” who solves the crime. *I Got a Monster* develops the opposing forces from the beginning of the book, with the cops as the antagonists and defense attorney Ivan Bates as the protagonist who will take down the GTTF. The first chapter follows sergeant Wayne Jenkins and detectives Marcus Taylor, Maurice Ward, and Evodio Hendrix as they stop Oreese Stevenson, force Stevenson to take them to his home, enter the home without a warrant, remove money and drugs, and then create a video recording where they pretend to find the remaining money and drugs for the first time. Bad guys. The second chapter begins with defense attorney Ivan Bates waiting for Stevenson’s wife to tell the story of his arrest, writing that Jenkins would not want Bates representing Stevenson because

⁴ I use “death” rather than “murder” here because no police were found guilty of Freddie Gray’s death, a subject explored at length in Fenton’s *We Own This City*.

“Bates knew about sneak and peaks [the police lingo for entering without a warrant]. He knew Jenkins took money. And if Stevenson told him how much money was missing, Bates might listen” (32). This early on, they foreshadow that Bates can take Jenkins down. Later, Bates gives Assistant U.S. Attorney Leo Wise, “a folder full of other cases he might want to look into if he was building a case against Jenkins” (162).

In *We Own This City*, Fenton casts Harford County Police, Baltimore County Police, the FBI, and the U.S. Attorneys as the protagonists, creating a good cop/ bad cop dynamic which begins during part II of the book, “Launch of an Investigation.” Fenton introduces Baltimore County Police Detective Scott Kilpatrick, who knew to be wary of city police detectives. “Kilpatrick said Jenkins’s cases had raised concerns. ‘You’d read the search warrants, and the probable cause wouldn’t make sense,’” (95) Fenton quotes Kilpatrick as saying. As Kilpatrick and another officer from Harford County begin investigating another drug dealer, it leads them to members of the Baltimore City Police, which means the investigation is turned over to the FBI and U.S. Attorneys, who Fenton ultimately gives credit for bringing down the unit. With a form of police as the good guys, *We Own This City* remains more in the cop shop subgenre than *I Got a Monster*.

At the center of both of the books and the GTTF is Wayne Jenkins, who is white. In her analysis of the development of the true crime genre, Laura Brower asserts, “We are in the realm of the psychopath or, more frequently, of the sociopath, whose evil has no visible cause: legislation cannot remove the source of the problem” (126). Neither book states that Jenkins is a sociopath but they portray him as an amoral person without remorse for his actions. Jenkins’s lies and deceit are on display in the first chapter of *I Got a Monster*, as Woods and Soderberg recount the arrest of Oreese Stevenson. This comes out through Jenkins’s actions rather than any backstory. He lies to Stevenson about being a federal agent (12), calls his bail bondsman-drug dealing friend and lies about how much Stevenson might have that they could steal (14), makes an illegal entry into Stevenson’s home (15), and takes cash and drugs from the home before they get the search warrant and film the fake drug bust (19).

In his concise backstory of Jenkins in chapter two, Fenton writes about a lawsuit filed against Jenkins in 2006 where the plaintiff Tim O'Connor accused Jenkins of “punching him in the face” and fracturing his orbital bones (20). Fenton uses the opportunity to introduce the reader to Jenkins’s ability to lie and manipulate, writing that O’Connor’s lawyer, “said he had noticed Jenkins trying to work one female juror in particular. Jenkins turned and smiled at the jury, drawing laughs from them as he raised his hands in a ‘Who, me?’ pose” (21). Fenton makes sure to add that the jury found in favor of O’Connor and that nothing went on Jenkins’s police record, before recounting an incident a few months later where Jenkins was on the stand contradicting evidence from a security camera in another physical altercation while on duty.

In both cases, the reader understands that Jenkins lies, doesn’t respect the law, is aggressive, and doesn’t feel remorse—some of the traits of a sociopath. If his “evil has no visible cause,” (Brower 126) then there can’t be an easy solution, either. Here, *I Got A Monster* remains more in the crime subgenre than *We Own This City*. Through his use of mode, Fenton explores the reasons why Jenkins committed crimes and how he was able to get away with them.

Mode

In “Recognizing the Art of Nonfiction: Literary Excellence in True Crime,” J. Madison Davis writes, “it isn’t the oddity or excess of the crime that allow true-crime books to earn the designation of literary excellence. That only comes from the writing,” (12) but he doesn’t explain what excellent writing in true crime would be. Someone might say, “I’ll know it when I read it,” but can we be more scientific than that? Is it to make the nonfiction work read more like fiction? What would be the purpose in constructing a narrative vs standard omniscient journalism to explore this one subject?

Even though I’ve spent a lot of time exploring their genre, subgenres, and form, calling both books nonfiction, cop shop/ crime, and journalism, this shouldn’t be what is interesting to us, according to

Babine. “The more interesting conversation is what it’s doing-- and how it’s doing it,” she writes. And this is the most interesting part of the conversation, especially for these two books, because what they are doing and how they are doing it is wherein their differences lie. To narrow in on mode, you have to ask “What creates the energy and engine in the piece?” as Babine writes. What captures the reader’s attention and keeps us reading? How does the author want the reader to move forward through the writing? She offers three modes of writing (narrative, lyric, and essay).⁵ *I Got A Monster* relies on Narrative Mode while *We Own This City* relies on Assay Mode.

In Narrative Mode, the energy comes from the movement of the plot. We want to know what happens next, which feels like the most obvious method for writing about crime. Neither the “nonfiction novel” nor true crime started with Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, but the creation of both have been attributed to him and his book, and not without cause. Browder argues that Capote, “ushered in the serious, extensive, non-fiction treatment of murder” (121) and any article on true crime or the emergence of “narrative nonfiction” books seems to need to acknowledge the book’s place in the canon. There is a crime or crimes and they have to be solved: what could be more plot-driven than that?

Like the word essay, Assay Mode is trying something. The author’s thoughts are not just on the page, but what the author is thinking and processing as things unfold is why we keep reading. In a recent conversation with author Saumya Roy about her book *Castaway Mountain: Love and Loss Among the Wastepickers of Mumbai*, she told me that she felt, “The most important role [of a nonfiction writer] is a seeker, seeking on behalf of the reader.” When we as writers are seekers and the readers experience our seeking, we are writing in Assay Mode. This doesn’t mean that there can’t be action in the book. Babine offers Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* as an example of memoir in the Assay Mode, and while

⁵ Lyric mode relies on the language of the piece to move the reader forward. Not impossible to do for a nonfiction crime journalism book, but not the first mode a writer would turn to.

we may be curious how Machado gets out of the abusive relationship, her exploration of why she got into the relationship and how it was changing her is much more interesting to the reader.

Narrative Mode in *I Got a Monster*

In *I Got A Monster*, Woods and Soderberg use Narrative Mode, and rely action and the forward momentum of plot to tell the story of the GTTF. It's not so much a whodunit (we all know that the GTTF is committing the crimes), but a how'd-it-come-crashing-down. The authors show us how attorney Ivan Bates began realizing that his clients were being framed by the GTTF (and likely committing other crimes) and how that led to further investigations, and ultimately, the GTTF arrests.

In an interview with *Baltimore Fishbowl*, Baynard Woods explains the basics of how they created a story that fell within the cop shop/ crime journalism book as subgenre and form: "The first thing we had to realize is that we were telling a story, not just dumping out everything we knew about the GTTF." This was not going to be an inverted pyramid book, but a narrative about the GTTF. Brandon Soderberg expands, "We wanted to really give readers a sense of what this all felt like," and to do so, the narrative would advance the story. He adds, "I thought of the book as more like a camera following them around. To make that feel visceral and real, you needed a lot of detail. And the detail is also where you saw just how terrible this was."

Using wiretaps taken on two of the officers, body camera footage, and testimony at the trials, the authors have the source material that allows them to follow the officers as they commit crimes. Woods and Soderberg begin the first chapter with a scene of the officers making the illegal stop and arrest of Oreese Stevenson, complete with play-by-play action:

Sergeant Wayne Jenkins was going the wrong way. He steered a silver Malibu full of plainclothes cops against traffic on a residential street, rolling past brick row houses with white trim and

pitched roofs resting atop dappled hills spotting with resurgent spring grass. He was looking for a monster (7).

They follow this with a description of who was in the car, details like a Quaker Oats box stuffed with cash, and reconstructed dialog:

“What money?” Brown [the passenger in Stevenson’s car] asked, moving the backpack that held a Quaker Oats box packed with \$20,000 out of view with his feet. (9)

“[W]riting in scenes was really important to both of us,” Woods told *Baltimore Fishbowl*, and they rely on action scenes like these to move the story forward, jumping from one arrest to another, one conversation to another. We see what the officers are doing, hear how they speak with one another, and realize they think they are invincible. Their authorial choices—to focus on scenes, reconstruct dialog, and place the reader with the cops—make the reader invested in the outcome of each scene. We find ourselves asking the characters: Are you really going to take that cocaine? Are you going to plant that gun? Are you going to get away with it? Similarly, we understand the different personalities of individual officers in the GTTF. With vivid details of the GTTF’s misdeeds, the reader also becomes emotionally invested in the victims of the crimes. Woods and Soderberg recount the story of when, in April 2010, Jenkins and two other officers attempted to arrest Umar Burley, who Jenkins thought might be a drug dealer. When one of the officers “jumped out [of an unmarked car] gripping a gun and wearing a black mask,” Burley sped away, followed by the cops until Burley crashed into another car. The elderly driver Elbert Davis suffered a heart attack on impact and the passenger was taken to the hospital in critical condition. When Jenkins didn’t find drugs or money in Burley’s car, another officer planted heroin in it. For the end of the scene, rather than just recounting what happens, they place the reader at the hospital:

Jenkins found Burley in the hospital and waited for him to get out of a CT scan.

“You’re definitely going to jail for the rest of your life now,” Jenkins told Burley.

“What? Why?” Burley said.

“Mr. Davis just passed,” Jenkins said.

The state charged Burley with Davis’s death, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office charged both men with the planted heroin. (119)

In the introduction to *Unspeakable Acts: True Tales of Crime, Murder, Deceit, and Obsession*, Patrick Radden Keefe writes that in true crime writing, there is a danger “when we focus on stories of individual characters and crimes, because the greatest crimes, now and always, have been systemic, and systemic stories are harder to tell” (np). For Woods and Soderberg, narrative often comes at the expense of exploring the reasons the police believe they can act with impunity. As Jenkins and the others arrive at Stevenson’s home, the authors write, “Jenkins wanted to get into the house for an exploratory, pre-warrant excursion he called ‘a sneak and peek.’ The trick was to do it without leaving a trace. Witnesses, cameras, or alarms could show he’d entered without a warrant” (15). They don’t tell the reader that entering without a warrant is unconstitutional, that a prosecutor might simply drop a case in which drugs were found through an unlawful search, or why police continue to do these kinds of illegal searches. In the case of Umar Burley, they do mention that Burley “had a gun case that went federal the year before,” but don’t explain what the impact of that case beyond this scene. Did that contribute to why Jenkins went after him as a suspected drug dealer? How does that impact his believability once the heroin has been found in his car?

In “Imagination in Nonfiction,” Philip Lopate writes about the temptation to make nonfiction more like fiction, since “fiction still enjoys greater literary cachet and status than nonfiction.” He focuses on why nonfiction writers should avoid imagining a “scene unfolding, moment by moment, that one did not witness firsthand,” arguing that those scenes will never feel authentic. The scenes in *I Got A Monster* do feel authentic, and make the book exciting and readable. However, by relying exclusively on Narrative Mode, the authors leave out the thinking work that enhances the reader’s understanding of the social condition that is intertwined with the events that transpire.

Assay Mode in *We Run This City*

Justin Fenton's version of the story of the Gun Trace Task Force is about something more than just the police officers in that unit. Fenton is the seeker, using Assay Mode, and his thinking and quest for an answers to "How could it get this way?" create energy. We see him sorting through the history of Baltimore and the police force, and the lives of Wayne Jenkins and the other officers so that he and the reader can arrive at new ideas about how these crimes could occur and possibilities to prevent it from happening again.

For him, Wayne Jenkins is a main character not because the action centers around him but because he is the mule who carries the story forward. "I wanted to pick up right where Jenkins started, and the agency that he was coming into," Fenton tells the *Baltimore Fishbowl*, and tracing Jenkins's time in the force "allowed me to tell the story of a city, and how we got to this place." He's not just telling a story, he's trying to answer that question: how did we get to a place where "Baltimore's Black communities have been both overpoliced and underpoliced" (268)? Fenton still uses narrative techniques like reconstructed dialog and scene-setting, but ultimately, his attempts at trying to answer this question are what drive the book. While Woods and Soderberg build Jenkins's background through his actions, Fenton's second chapter provides a biography of Jenkins intertwined with a history of Baltimore. Jenkins was born in 1980, the same year that a shopping complex in the Inner Harbor opened in an attempt to boost "the city's tourism and sense of pride" (10) and when General Motors and Bethlehem Steel were cutting jobs. Fenton juxtaposes Jenkins's life growing up with the crack epidemic, no-tolerance policing, and the homicides that Simon was writing about, revealing to the reader the world that Jenkins grew up in and one that created today's Baltimore police force. He writes that even in the suburb of Baltimore where Jenkins grew up, "a hidden drug culture took root" (11) with a drug-related quadruple homicide happening on Jenkins's street. A couple years after Jenkins joined the force, two officers were convicted on extortion, drug conspiracy, and handgun charges, which "city officials treated...as an aberration...and continued to swat away claims

of misconduct within the force” (19). This control of the narrative places the reader on a journey where they begin with the knowledge that drugs and homicides are a problem, but so too are the police.

Throughout the book, Fenton tells us what the officers are doing, why they might have been doing it, what was illegal about it, and why they might have gotten away with illegal behavior. Using the same arrest that *I Got a Monster* begins with, Fenton describes the scene, adding the valuable detail that when Jenkins was out on patrol, he was lauded for profiling Black men with backpacks:

For Jenkins, the backpack set off alarms. He was known in the department for having “the eye”—like an outdoorsman spotting a hawk in the trees, Jenkins was said to be able to register the smallest signs of possible criminal activity on the streets—things that others might never have noticed. A lot of the time, however, it was simple profiling (126-7).

Fenton begins chapter four explaining how hierarchy in a police department works, and how that structure could allow the officers to get away with their crimes:

In the Baltimore Police Department’s paramilitary structure, the most crucial supervision occurs at the sergeant level. Sergeants are the bosses who directly observe and interact with the officers on the ground....And just as good sergeants can ensure that information makes its way to the top, they can also screen problems and keep complaints from going any further (36).

To call Assay Mode an energy might feel a little odd, since it doesn’t have to be flashy and fast, and in fact, can be slow and meditative as the writer sorts through thoughts. And perhaps precisely because we are talking about nonfiction (after all, you can just Google Gun Trace Task Force and get the gist of what happened in minutes), the what (narrative) is less interesting, and the why and how (assay) is what the reader really wants to know. When the Baltimore Police Department learns that they are going to be placed under a consent decree from the Department of Justice, an internal newsletter “highlighted the work of the Gun Trace Task Force as a model for the department” (174). Fenton doesn’t explicitly say that he is wondering “How can that be? They’ve been committing crimes,” but by introducing the idea that the

GTTF is still being praised, we ask that question. And Fenton answers: although they had “seized 132 handguns and made 110 arrest on handgun violations....40% of Jenkins’s gun cases were dropped by prosecutors, higher than the department average” (174), meaning the police didn’t care about whether these were legitimate arrests. These sections of text come in the form of exposition (the dreaded telling), but provide the information that satisfies the reader’s need for answers.

Fenton also spends more time on what may seem like tangential side stories. He goes into the death of Freddie Gray and the uprising that occurred after his death and how that manifested a distrust and disdain for the Baltimore Police. He also tells the story of Detective Sean Suiter, who died after having been shot by his own service weapon the day before he was going to appear before a grand jury relating to the GTTF.⁶ He uses these side stories to explore his bigger question.

Conclusions

Writing a nonfiction book that relies heavily on the tools of fiction and where the reader is driven know what happens and the outcome of the story can leave us with strong emotions. However, it might fail to dig deeper and build out a rounded reality. Having the author serve as a guide who asks questions and looks for can provide a more complete understanding of real events that transpired.

Woods and Soderberg are not exploring how the actions of police, politicians, prosecutors, the court system, or society at large engage with each other in *I Got A Monster*. When the authors follow the crimes, the investigation, and the downfall of the GTTF tightly, the reader gets the “visceral and real” feeling of the crimes the GTTF committed they want to convey. I finished their book being disgusted by the GTTF in a way I don’t even want to admit. The authors have truly created monsters. I knew all of the crimes in detail and how those crimes had impacted their (mostly) Black victims. I was glad they were in

⁶ The medical examiner ruled it a homicide, but a later investigation found it to be a suicide. Suiter’s family denied that it was a suicide. In January 2021, a memo showed that weeks before his death, the FBI had accused Suiter of planting drugs at a crime scene.

prison. I was disappointed that it was a defense attorney—not the State’s Attorney’s Office—that had helped bring the officers down.

In his analysis of *Homicide* and two other early 1990s cop shop books, Wilson contends, “We hear too little, for example, linking downtown development and inner-city unemployment,” which, “turns the terrain into the property of the homicide investigator, a site of clues not to social condition but to individual criminality and predation” (732). Wilson might see a similar problem with *I Got A Monster*. When a writer focuses on that action—the narrative story of a crime or cop drama—they might lose sight of systemic problems, which require Assay mode to explore. “Very little in these books is said about theories of economic underdevelopment, about debates over the underclass, about different typologies of gang affiliation” (732), Wilson writes. Through juxtaposing the story of the GTTF with Baltimore’s social and economic problems; exposition on how law and law enforcement are supposed to operate; and including narratives outside of the main thread, *We Own This City* explores systemic problems. There is a sense of revelation that comes with a writer’s use of Assay Mode, where the reader experiences what the writer is sorting out and perhaps thinking, “I never thought of it that way before.” If the writer only takes the path of action, they lose the chance for the reader to have a revelation that could change their perception of the Baltimore Police department or Baltimore in general.

I read *We Own This City* immediately after *I Got a Monster*, so I already knew the crimes of the GTTF in detail, but Fenton’s use of the Assay Mode left me with greater understanding and more complex feelings. The officers are still terrible, but rather than just being disgusted by the eight GTTF officers who were found guilty, I felt waves of disappointment: at the Mayor’s office for continuing to not have solutions for gun violence other than violating civil rights; at the police department for failing to follow up on internal complaints; at the State’s Attorney’s Office for continuing to trust the testimony of police who were unreliable, to name a few. I saw how white flight, federal drug policies, and Freddie Gray’s death; how a whole system had failed. This wasn’t about “individual criminality and predation,” as Wilson puts it, but

the systemic problems that strengthen the arguments for defunding the police, bringing in prosecutors who will go after the police, and ending the police officer's bill of rights. Using the story of the GTTF, I saw how we got to this place, and maybe, how we can get out of it.

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