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Chuck Bowden: Reporting Out the Bullshit

By and large, privilege blinds those under its shroud from many of the horrors and realities of the world around them. Social media presents too many daily examples of how middle to upper class Americans, especially, seem woefully content to accept the narrative coming out of Washington and ignore the plight of those around the world less fortunate than they. The world needs more writers like Charles Bowden to pick up a pen or sit down behind a keyboard, because he eschews the easy way out that those privileged people eagerly swallow. Bowden embodies the political spirit of the early literary journalists and utilizes many of the old and new tools, alike, to contribute truth to the situation along the Mexican border. His shocking visuals jolt the reader into an understanding of truths, that may have hitherto been unknown, by expertly utilizing techniques from Tom Wolfe's original recipe: scene-by-scene construction, point of view and status life. Charles Bowden is an excellent writer to end the semester with because his skill as a wordsmith stands out from others studied in this class; his writings and spirit certainly have potential to inspire a new generation of – how he'd call it – literary "reporters."

Bowden excels at utilizing the techniques of literary journalists, and this ability sets his writing apart from conventional journalism and nonfiction. Three of his stories, *We Bring Fear, Exodus: Border-Crossers Forge a New America* and *The Sicario: a Juárez Hit Man Speaks* contain multiple strong examples of the original literary journalism recipe, as well as instances of characterization, internal monologue, metaphor, close psychological distance, stance and, of course, the powerful use of voice that permeates all his pieces. Bowden's care in crafting absorbing scene-by-scene narratives and status life details defines his work and results in emotional visuals; the story of Emilio Gutiérrez Soto and his escape from Ascensión in *"We*

Bring Fear" is a clinic on these two points. Bowden employs a scene structure in this piece that gives it a cinematic feel. It's nonlinear, so he's able to start with an exciting sequence of Soto and his son escaping to U.S. customs and then transition to different points in time. For example, shortly after the opening, Bowden jumps ahead many years with a scene of him and Soto talking, and then he flashes back to Soto's childhood when he was 13. Because Bowden's exceptional reporting talent enables him to capture a ridiculous level of detail, he's able to apply this in his status life and render incredibly believable third-person versions of Soto; he makes the reader feel like he was with the subject all along.

> Emilio is 13 years old. This is part of basic Mexican schooling: submission. I remember once being in a small town when the then president of Mexico descended like a god with an entourage and massive security. The poor fled into their shanties until it was over. (Bowden, 2009, Fear)

At the beginning of *Exodus,* Bowden swaps back and forth between first and third-person point of view – while still leaning on his excellent status life – to illustrate the meeting between him and the migrant boy who got separated from his coyote. Bowden also projects the boy's internal monologue for the reader in order to nurture a relationship between the two and explain his survival instinct.

> He is 17 and afraid to give his name. He is afraid of the desert. He is afraid to talk of the coyote he hired. He is not afraid of the Border Patrol, but he cannot seem to get the agents' attention … The boy wonders if his coyote will return for him. I tell him, Not likely. (Bowden, 2006, Exodus)

Bowden executes his most chilling prose in *The Sicario* by establishing a super close stance and psychological distance to the professional killer that he sits down with in the secret motel room. The sicario has an interesting arc throughout that sees him edge closer and closer to

rekindling that rush of the assassin he used to be, but the tension in the room between the two men was the most impressive thing; the camera seemed to almost either be on the table between them or an over-the-shoulder shot from Bowden's perspective. Either way, that distance created was paramount to the tone of the piece.

> I ask him how he became a killer.
>
> He smiles and says, "My arm grew."
>
> He takes a sheet of paper, draws five vertical lines, and writes in the spaces in black ink: childhood, police, narco, god. The four phases of his life. Then he scratches out what he has written until there is nothing but solid ink on the page.
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> He cannot leave tracks. He cannot quite give up the habits of a lifetime. (Bowden, 2009, Sicario)

Bowden's writing is so important because it slices through the veneer of what privileged people consider to be reality. People in the U.S. generally don't care about what's going on in Mexico – or the rest of the world – but that's because they're distanced from it. Also, the countries' respective governments have zero motivation to illuminate the realities; however, Chuck's writing helps the reader see it and *feel* it for what it actually is.

> There are two Mexicos: There is the one reported by the U.S. press … This Mexico has newspapers, courts, laws, and is seen by the United States government as a sister republic.
>
> It does not exist.
>
> There is a second Mexico where the war is *for* drugs, where the police and the military fight for their share of drug profits … The reporter lives in this second Mexico. (Bowden, 2009, Fear)

If enough young writers and journalists are introduced to his work, Bowden's legacy of reporting, environmentalism, storytelling and understanding will reach them; the heart of the man, beneath all of the cynicism, will reveal itself.

Works Cited

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