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BOOK REVIEWS

Jack Hart,
Story Craft:
The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction
(U. Chi. Press 2011) (Ruth Anne Robbins, rev'r)

Book Review

Better Storytelling in the Nonfiction World of Legal Writing

A review of Jack Hart, *Story Craft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* (U. Chi. Press 2011), 280 pages.

Ruth Anne Robbins*

In a world where K–12 educators are ramping up the amount of nonfiction that students will be required to read as part of a “better” common curriculum,¹ Jack Hart’s book, *Story Craft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*,² serves to remind us that choosing to write about nonfiction topics doesn’t condemn the author to writing dull prose. Nonfiction and non-narrative are two very different concepts. A narrative incorporates elements of storytelling into it. Thus, Hart argues, good narrative can—and should—be a goal, even when the material comes from facts and data rather than from an author’s imagination.

Even in a nonfiction setting, storytelling is an essential skill because humans learn best when information is told through story.³ Hart begins in the first paragraphs of *Story Craft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*, “[S]tory is story. The same underlying principles apply regardless of where you tell your tale Successful nonfiction storytelling requires a basic understanding of fundamental story theory

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¹ See e.g. Common Core State Standards Initiative, *English Language Arts Standards*, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy> (accessed April 26, 2013).

² Jack Hart, *Story Craft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* (U. Chicago Press 2011).

³ For readings about the importance of story to human learning, see generally Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: the Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Libraries Unlimited 2007) (presenting a detailed bibliography). See also Keith Oatley, PsychologyToday.com: *The Psychology of Fiction, Are Stories Useful?*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-psychology-fiction/201108/are-stories-useful> (Aug. 25, 2011) (discussing “Literary Darwinism,” a theory that proposes stories are part of the adaptations that have permitted our species’ survival).<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-psychology-fiction/201108/are-stories-useful>

and story structures the theory suggests. Ignore them, and you'll fight a losing battle with human nature."⁴ Such study of story has now created a comfort zone for legitimate scholarly inquiry and pedagogy not only in legal and continuing legal education, but in science: neurobiologists have conducted MRI tests of people thinking in story structure.⁵ Studying storytelling must also be serious enough for lawyers and law professors alike.

Lawyers tell their client's nonfiction story to the appropriate audience as a part of negotiation, litigation, or transactional representation. That simple truth has led to a plethora of resources for lawyers. Legal writing professors, clinicians, and doctrinal law professors come together every other year to discuss "Applied Legal Storytelling."⁶ A simple Google search for "Storytelling CLE" will net dozens more options.

Against that backdrop, an eminently readable book about nonfiction storytelling should appeal to the legal reader. And *Story Craft* is one of those books that lawyers and academics alike can add to their collection and learn from. Hart knows how to draw in an audience, and the clever legal reader will appreciate his picture-within-a-picture approach. Although the chapters each stand alone as nonfiction, he skillfully weaves narratives into each chapter's lesson. As one might expect of a former writer for *The Oregonian*, many of his examples are drawn from his journalism days. Those examples make the lessons immediately concrete to us lawyers. And his style offers us these lessons in lengths that are easy to grasp and weave together.

In Chapter 4, for example, Hart convinces the reader that the writer should find and develop a distinct voice and feel comfortable allowing her personality to emerge on the page. Voice is more than merely a quirk of those authors who have already established themselves. Rather, adopting a writer's voice allows one's readers to have a "personable companion" to guide them on the reading experience.⁷ Bringing humanity to an essay or article enhances its charm.⁸ Beyond voice, however, the same chapter discusses the writer's position and style, both of which Hart parses from the more common topic of the writer's voice. A writer's style is the

4 *Id.* at 7.

5 Hart cites two *New York Times* synopses of the research: Benedict Carey, *This Is Your Life (and How You Tell It)*, N.Y. Times F1 (May 22, 2007); Steven S. Hall, *Journey to the Center of My Mind*, N.Y. Times SM122 (June 6, 1999).

6 For a flavor of those conferences, see the 2011 Applied Legal Storytelling Conference Program. Sturm College of Law, University of Denver, *Applied Legal Storytelling Conference Program*, <http://www.law.du.edu/index.php/storytelling-conference/program> (accessed April 26, 2013).

7 Hart, *supra* n. 2, at 64.

8 *Id.* at 66.

expression of the writer's personality;⁹ the writer's "position" is where the writer stands relative to the distance from her topic, be it from the air or standing right next to it.¹⁰

A legal writer who agrees with this reasonable premise (and who would not?) can take away a renewed sense of comfort that voice is not something to leave behind when advocating for a client, but is instead something to embrace. One popular legal writing author, Ross Guberman, notes that when he asks associates at law firms what they think about their writing in comparison to more senior attorneys' writing, he hears the junior attorneys admire seasoned attorneys' ability to be "punchy."¹¹ That makes sense to Guberman: "the most renowned advocates of all write 'punchier' motions and briefs. One reason is that experience begets confidence, confidence begets joy, and joy begets fresh, conversational language."¹²

Each chapter provides those sorts of readily accessible and transferable messages for legal writers. When discussing point of view, Hart explains not just the basics of selecting a character's perspective, but also discusses the idea of the character's distance from the action and the relative level of detail that will flow from an aerial or ground view.¹³ The immediate application that springs to mind is a greater understanding of when to dive deeper into the weeds for a case illustration that is factually analogous to the client's case, versus when to take an aerial view of a case in order to make generalizations as part of one's advocacy strategy. Later chapters analyze story organization, from reporting to explanatory narratives. These chapters can help lawyers plan an overall approach to the narrative of the particular document or case plan.

The first parts of each chapter review some of the fundamentals and graces of storytelling, and provide a useful review of—or introduction to—Applied Legal Storytelling. The Applied Legal Storytelling movement is, after all, driven by a willingness to study storytelling techniques and transfer them into the legal advocacy world. The second part of each chapter goes deeper into storytelling techniques and offers new insights to legal writers and scholars who already have a grasp of the primary toolkit. Carry a pencil with you—you will want to take notes in the margins.

The hallmark of a nonfiction book's appeal to someone as busy as a practitioner or writing professor is the reader's ability to pick up the book

9 *Id.* at 69–70.

10 *Id.* at 67.

11 *Id.*

12 *Id.*

13 *Id.* at 41–61.

after a week or so of absence, and to be immediately immersed in that week's installment. I confess that I dragged my heels on this review. Not because I disliked the book or avoided the book—I read a few chapters almost as soon as I purchased it. Rather, I wanted to hold on this review until I had decided whether the book was more than a good read, whether it was something I would *use*. Several weeks later, I noticed that Hart had already influenced my teaching and made an appearance in one professional presentation. That Hart's work stands up to such a test in both merit and utility speaks, experientially, for itself.