

HOW TO CREATE ENGAGING PERSONAL TRAVEL WRITING: A CASE OF TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED IN WRITING CREATIVE NON-FICTION

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Abstract

Travel writing is a creative non-fiction that has real places as its focus accounts. However, 'Any form of travel text is always a constructed, crafted artefact, which should never be read naively as just a transparent window on the world (Curl 2011:30). According to Davis and Robinson-McCarthy (2012a:8) 'most travel writing [...] tends to consist of two parts – the narrative of experience and the greater theme mediated that the experience serves to enunciate'. Swick in his article, 'Road Not taken'(2001:65) makes several claims about what constitutes good travel writing. In other words, he says that there will be good travel writing pieces if they do not lack of some significant elements which can engage the readers. Swick (2001:65-67) mentions seven missing elements which often occur in boring travel writing pieces: negative, experience, imagination, interpretation, humour, dialogue, and people. A textual analysis of two well-known travel writing works, Peter Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Benjamin Law's *Tourism*, was conducted. This paper discuss the techniques used by these travel writers to convey their travel experiences, to transform incident they have experienced into narratives, and to engage the reader in their works particularly in the type of personal narrative based on the reference to Swick's article (2001) – on why so much travel writing is so boring. The conclusion of this paper is that Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* can be classified as good travel writing pieces as well as personal narratives. These travel writing pieces can inspire readers to take a trip through the authors' personal discovery.

Keywords: travel writing, personal narrative, creative non fiction

"Traveling is like talking to the men of other countries." Rene Descartes.

Introduction

Literary nonfiction (sometimes called creative nonfiction) comprises such forms as memoir, personal essay, travel writing, profile, lyric essay, polemic, meditation, reportage, biography, history, cultural and political commentary, and reviews of the arts. While journalism employs established forms and methods, literary nonfiction uses the full range of techniques it shares with fiction and poetry but refuses to alter provable fact. Literary nonfiction celebrates all that is distinctive in an individual writer's voice and vision. Travel writing is a form of creative nonfiction in which the narrator's encounters with foreign places serve as the dominant subject. Travel writing takes many different forms, and may include many other genres, such as personal narrative, adventure narratives, ethnography, scientific observation, profiles of interesting people, and soon. The various types of travel writing might be sorted by rhetorical purpose. When reading travel literature, the readers can learn what literary devices the author has used to portray his or her experiences. Characters, plot, theme, symbolism, figurative language, dialogue, and other literary writing strategies may be examined. Therefore, the readers can learn literary analysis while enjoying "true life" stories. There are several types of personal narrative in creative nonfiction. The most popular is the personal narrative essay or memoir essay. It focuses on a personal experience that is a turning point, a change in direction, an event which has significant meaning, and also shares a universal truth with readers. You can read the personal essay in magazines, literary journals, and the newspaper.

Personal narrative essay is based on memory of an event or experience or moment in time that had significant meaning to a writer. The writer's task is to tell a true story about a turning point in his/her life. This true story could be about an illness, disease, death, journey, quest, pilgrimage, first encounter, and so forth. In other words, the event or experience actually happened to the writer. To unearth the details of this story, the writer must mine his/her memory. The writer's goal is to look back into his/her memory, to an earlier time in the writer's life, and unearth true stories that had significant meaning to him/her. That is why the personal narrative is also called a memoir essay—which implies that the writer is writing a true story about a slice of his/her life. It is based on a brief span of time—not the writer's entire life. Therefore, personal travel narrative is a form of creative nonfiction in which the narrator's encounters with foreign places serve as the dominant subject which is based on memory of an event or experience or moment in time that had significant meaning to a writer.

Too much travel writing fails to address essential writing elements and are saturated with positive, sweetened journalism, written by people who have received an incentive for their thoughts. What separates good travel writing from the bad travel writing can be answered by considering six essential elements for travel writing: history, sharing a journey's characters, imagination, insight, humour and dialogue; many of these elements are also found to be essential for quality fiction writing (Granville, 1990). Furthermore, Swick (2001:65-67) mentions seven missing elements which often occur in boring travel writing pieces: negative, experience, imagination, interpretation, humour, dialogue, and people.

It is important to read travel writing and to understand what works and what does not work. Therefore, a textual analysis of two well-known travel writing works, Peter Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Benjamin Law's *Tourism*, was conducted. This paper aims to discuss the techniques used by two Australian well-known travel writers to convey their travel experiences, to transform incident they have experienced into travel narratives, and to engage the reader in their works particularly in the type of personal narrative based on the reference to Swick's article (2001) – on why so much travel writing is so boring. The two travel writing are Peter Davis's 'Bollywood blockbuster' and Benjamin Law's 'Tourism'. These two writers utilise a broad range of the elements mentioned by Swick, although each have a slightly different approach to their travel writing.

The author of 'Bollywood blockbuster', Peter Davis, is an Australian writer and a teacher. Peter Davis combines teaching writing at Deakin University and research commitments with freelance writing, photography and media consulting. He publishes regular features and photographs in a variety of newspapers and magazines and he undertakes assignments in Australia, Asia and Europe.

The author of 'Tourism', Benjamin Law is a first generation of Chinese descent, born and raised in Australia. Benjamin Law is a Sydney-based journalist, columnist and screenwriter, and has completed a PhD in television writing and cultural studies. He is the author of two books—*The Family Law* (2010) and *Gaysia: Adventures in the Queer East* (2012)—and the co-author of the comedy book *Shit Asian Mothers Say* (2014) with his sister Michelle and illustrator Oslo Davis. Both of his books have been nominated for Australian Book Industry Awards. Furthermore, Benjamin is a frequent contributor to *Good Weekend* (*The Sydney Morning Herald/The Age*), *frankie* and *The Monthly*, and has also written for over 50 publications, businesses and agencies in Australia and worldwide.

Discussion

In his travel writing, Peter Davis has strong representation of himself as a character within his own narrative. In his article, Davis mentions that he is 'on an assignment to write about the colossal film industry', and the result of story itself is both an article on the Bollywood film industry and his personal experience. He does not mention his writing assignment again, which sets up the possibility that the article is his more personal, reflective and direct response on the subject.

In his travel writing, Benjamin Law recounts his experiences of 'family tradition' of going to theme parks in Australia, as his family dislikes the Australian way of the outdoors, especially camping. He describes how they would often travel to theme parks in his grandmother's Honda and upon arrival would do his best to 'distinguish [himself] from the actual Asian tourists'. He was only twelve years old when his parents separated and describes his father's failed attempts of keeping the tradition going as they only spent four days a month together. He wants to fit in with the Australian crowds and wonders what others think of his family and at the end of the story states that 'someone has suggested [they] go camping.

Davis and Robinson-McCharty (2012b, p.24) describe the personal travel narrative as 'an incident (or series of incidents) that happened to an author in a particular location.' In *Bollywood Blockbuster* (1998), Peter Davis describes his experience when he was on assignment to write about the colossal Indian film industry, Bollywood, India. In *Tourism* (2008), Benjamin Law describes a funny recount of his child's "happy" memories of visiting theme parks and the life before and after a divorce. Furthermore, Law discusses his childhood traveling experiences – a story about the narrator's childhood traveling experience with his family who prefers theme parks rather than camping. I argue that both Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* are engaging personal narratives because both of them employ Swick's significant elements of good travel writing.

The first element good travel writing mentioned by Swick is 'negative'. Swick claims that the negatives have a significant function in travel writing because 'joining the negative in the travel story's closet of unmentionable is a sense of the present' (2001, p.66). Furthermore, using the negatives will differentiate the authors from the narrators of conventional travel stories who 'tend to be interested only in history or in the ephemeral and nugatory realm of the trendy: the latest restaurants, the hottest clubs' (p.66).

Davis' *Bollywood Blockbuster* employs a few negatives that give the sense of the present in the Indian Bollywood film industry. For example:

Between each [angle] take the makeup-artist stood in front of me with a broken comb and a cracked mirror. "We are adjusting you," she said (p.117).

Law's *Tourism* also employs a few negatives that give the sense of present:

We'd travel like this-faces smashed against the glass; no leg room; the two smallest children illegally wedged between various legs-for a good three hours before we reached the Gold Coast. By the time we got to the theme park, our limbs were numb, our nerve endings destroyed (p.147).

The second element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is 'experience'. To make comprehensible their experiences, travel writers draw, perhaps unconsciously, upon assumptions pertaining to peoples and places that they visit, as well as presentation of the other and the external world' (Burroughs 2011, p.4).

Davis' *Bollywood Blockbuster* employs rich experiences supported by strong dialogue. When he is offered a role as a "sudden actor" by the producer of Bollywood, he describes it in the following way.

'Excuse me,' he said in soft, beautiful English. 'My name is Arjun. I, a film producer and I've been watching you. Actually, I am wondering if you would like to be in my movie' (p.116).

Law's *Tourism* also employs rich experiences. This can be read from the narrator's funny and unforgettable experience when he and his family travelled to a suburban area to visit a deserted tourist attraction called the Big Bottle and later to Forest Glen Deer Sanctuary, a typically neglected drive-in wildlife preserve (p.150). Swick underlines that 'the job of travel writers is to have experiences that are beyond the realm of the average tourist, to go beneath the surface, and then to write interestingly of what they find' (2001, p.66). Both Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* use their experience as the means to explore how they travel, not merely where they are travelling.

The third element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is imagination. 'Travel captured the public mind as well as the imaginations of writers and intellectual' (Farley 2010, p.193). Swick states that 'most travel journalists are under the impression that since they are writing non-fiction – and travel non-fiction at that – they need only record what is there (and, as we have seen, not all of that). Yet all writing is enhanced by a creative imagination' (2001, p.66). Davis' *Bollywood Blockbuster* employs a strong imagination. When he was offered the role as a "sudden actor", he muses:

Maybe he was seeking a donation to some obscure charity of which he was the self-appointed money collector. Worse, he might have wanted my kidneys for a transplant. Because I'm a cautious traveller, I worked through all possible scenarios and waited a whole five seconds before saying, 'yes' (p.116).

Law's *Tourism* also employs strong imagination when he remembers travelling with his siblings and both of his parents who actually have divorced:

'I wondered what they thought of our family, and whether they questioned why the Chinese family's parents sat so far away from one another. Maybe it was a cultural thing. I'd continue to watch them, wondering how, and why, their parents got along so well together, and how strange their families must have been in private' (p.152).

The fourth element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is interpretation. Swick underlines that 'good travel writers understand that times have changed, and in an age when everybody has been everywhere [...], it is not enough simply to describe a landscape, you must now interpret it' (2001, p.66). Davis interprets the film studio he was observing: 'Like much of India itself, these studios exude a rhythm that defies order but is at once seductively entertaining and strangely soothing' (p.116). Law's *Tourism* also makes use of interpretation when he describes travelling to a theme park:

For parents raising five children, theme parks made so much sense. They were clean. They were safe. There were clear designated activities, and auditory and visual stimuli that transcended barriers of race, language and age. Also: you could buy heaps of useless shit. This seems to be an exercise in which Asians of all nationalities, ages and socioeconomic backgrounds naturally excel: buying shit (p.147).

The fifth element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is humour. Swick mentions the sole purpose of humour as the means 'to get a laugh, not to reveal interesting truths about national character' (2001, p.67). Peter Davis is a travel writer who incorporates mild humour into his stories. Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* employs a humour to immediately engage the reader from the first line: 'I don't usually allow a complete stranger to remove my trousers. But in India anything is possible' (p.116). This creates a potentially humorous scene and also that extra curiosity from readers to further explore the sentences that follow.

Law's *Tourism* also employs humour as quoted below:

'Mum, come on,' I'd say as she posed us at the entrance of yet another ride. 'Everyone's going to think we're tourists' (p.148). ...

'We are tourists, you idiot,' she replied. 'Now smile big!' It would take her about twenty seconds to finally press the shutter, and another five to release it. We'd groan (p.148).

The sixth element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is dialogue. Swick states that "The emergence of humour is handicapped by the absence of a dialogue" (2001, p.67). Both Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* employ dialogue. During *Bollywood blockbuster* Davis introduces a character with the use of dialogue: "My name is Arjun," which tunes his readers into wanting more information about this character. "I'm a film producer and I've been watching you ... would like to do a film with me?" Davis then writes. He afterwards goes on to provide insight, related to this character and about the travel story's location: "in India no request is what is seems" and "perhaps he was after my camera?" Immediately, hands-on experience is sensed from Davis giving the reader the impression Davis is street-smart in the ways of India. This comforts readers to trust his insight into India's darker side and engages readers to want more information from Davis' experiences in India. Once readers open their guard up to Davis he then goes on to give his knockout sentence: "Worse, he might have wanted my kidneys for a transplant," which gives a shock effect for readers as Davis gives the chilling reality of the third world.

However, Law's *Tourism* employs greater amount of dialogue compared to Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster*. Such dialogue in Law's *Tourism* can be seen when the narrator tells about his father who asked about the plan to travel:

'So, what's the plan for this weekend? He asked. 'You got any ideas?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Haven't we done everything around here already?'

'How about the Ginger Factory? Or Underwater World/ you guys like turtles. They're Tammy's favourite, right?'

'We did that last month,' I said, sighing. 'You know, we don't have to go somewhere special every weekend. We could just hang out' (p.151).

The last element of good travel writing mentioned by Swick is people. By employing dialogue, the authors have showed the readers that there are people living and involved in their travel narrative rather than merely telling about the place or landscape. Davis employs vivid characterization in his narrative, for example his description of an Indian film producer: 'I was enjoying the spectacle when a tall, slim, urbane-looking man with a grey beard stepped in front of me' (p.116). Law's *Tourism* also employs vivid characterization supported by a distinctive accent or dialect. An example of this characterization is described below:

'Wah, what is going on?' They'd raise their tattooed eyebrows. 'You need to tell your parents they must make an effort to get back together! Ai-ya, why would any parents split up like this? You're only children! And no marriage is a walk in the park, is it?' (p.149).

The related element of people employed in Law's *Tourism* is shown to the reader by the character's worldview as spoken by the narrator's mother:

'We were never camping people,' Mum explains now. 'See, Asians - we're scared of dying. White people, they like to "live life to the full" and "die happy." She pauses, before adding, 'Asians, we're the opposite' (p.147).

In addition, the narrator of *Bollywood Blockbuster* tells the readers that he gets new experiences as an actor although only for one shooting. He even asks himself: 'What the hell is a Jewish boy from Melbourne doing as a Catholic priest in a Tamil blockbuster?' This is quite different from the narrator of Law's *Tourism* who seems to tell the reader that he goes traveling with theme park as an escape from his reality, his life at home while living with his divorced parents. This kind of escape is quite common in travel literature as Davidson (2001, p.254) explains that:

Travel literature was always predicated on privilege; it may always have had at least one of its roots in a desire to escape the real world rather than apprehend it better, and it has always reflected the movement of world history as seen from the perspective of the centre. But surely never before has it risked floating free of its own ground.

Besides employing Swick's significant elements of good travel writing, both Davis' *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* use enough research to support their travel narratives. Davis uses research to find the number of film produced by Bollywood and the function of the Ganesha statue in India (p.116). The author of Law's *Tourism* uses the research to track the attractions and wildlife preserves he has visited which might not be found nowadays exactly as the narrator tells the reader (p.152).

'Modern travel writing is a field of non-fiction whose primary focus is a particular place and whose primary purpose is to illuminate something about that place and about the experience of travel' (George and Hindle 2005, p.11). Moreover, a good travel writing 'successfully communicates to the reader something beyond the experience of simply being or getting there' (Davis et al 2012, p.116). In addition, 'Successful travel writing mediates between two poles; the individual physical things it describes, on the hand, and the larger theme that it is [...] universal' (Fussell 1987, p.16).

Both Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Law's *Tourism* can be classified as successful travel narratives because its authors mediate between their individual traveling experiences and what is universal within their personal experiences for the readers by employing significant elements such as fiction writing techniques.

Travelling also 'neither requires a deliberate decision to move beyond one's comfort zone - something the tourist neither desire nor expects' (Davis and Robinson-McCarthy 2012c, p.11). In David's *Bollywood Blockbuster* for instance, the narrator can be said that he is out of his comfort zone in his role as observer of the Bollywood film industry; he becomes a sudden actor of Bollywood itself. The more interesting thing is that he is still offered for his action in the future - a rare opportunity for many people, as the film producer said: 'Call me when you're next town.' In Law's *Tourism*, the narrator himself tells the reader that he plans to move out of his comfort zone of theme park: 'We're throwing around some ideas for what to do, since this will be the last time the family will be in the same place, at the same time, for quite a while. Someone has suggested we go camping' (p.152).

'Travel begins and ends at home' (Colbert 2012, p.1). This is suitable with the travel narrative of Law's *Tourism* which tells the reader about the narrator's experience from the time he wakes up at home and preparing himself to go travelling until he returns home again. It is quite different from Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster*, which do not allude about his home in Australia during his traveling time in India. Additionally, the goal of travel writers most commonly is 'to bring back knowledge of other places' (Carl 2011, p.174). This is what has been done by the author of *Bollywood Blockbuster* with his experience. As a traveller, Peter Davis brings back his knowledge and experiences about India particularly the Indian film industry. The similar way is also done by the author of *Tourism* with his experience of theme park travelling.

Conclusion

Peter Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Benjamin Law's *Tourism* can be classified as good travel writing as well as personal narratives. Both of this works are great examples of travel writing. Peter Davis and Benjamin Law utilize the balance of the six elements can be played with to create different stories for different readers. Too much of one element, then not enough of another, may bring a story crashing down; failure to include any of these elements may associate someone's travel writing with the everyday travel journalism - the often bad travel writing.

As personal travel writing, Peter Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Benjamin Law's *Tourism* are intimate, allowing the authors to speak of what a journey or destination means to them and how they are transformed by it. Furthermore, the personal narratives document the authors' travel experiences in a particular place and they do not have to include the complete documentation of nature the authors have seen. In other words, the authors do not merely tell about the place or the personal aspect alone, but they mostly incorporate engaging personal experience in a particular location by employing Swick's significant elements of good travel writing. Therefore, good travel writing pieces such as Peter Davis's *Bollywood Blockbuster* and Benjamin Law's *Tourism* can inspire readers to take a trip through the authors' personal discovery.

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