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New Journalism: Roots and Influence

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Murray State University Honors College

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New Journalism: Roots and Influence

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New Journalism: Roots and Influence

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for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

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Abstract

New Journalism is a genre of journalism that broadly falls under the feature story category in many newspapers and magazines. The form was pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s by Tom Wolfe of *New York Magazine*, and it strove to tell nonfiction stories in the style of a novel (Wolfe, *The New Journalism*). New Journalists used elements of fiction such as point of view and dialogue to tell the stories of their subjects. Although they were works of nonfiction, these articles and books more closely resembled fiction in style and form. In this project, New Journalism is defined and characterized by its core elements. Then, these characteristics are identified and explored in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Wolfe relies heavily on the core characteristics of New Journalism to craft his argument to readers. These characteristics will be applied to a modern example of literary nonfiction, "Me Talk Pretty One Day" by David Sedaris. The characteristics of New Journalism are also demonstrated in a short essay based on my own experiences as an expecting mother during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Table of Contents

1	Defining New Journalism.....	1
2	The Characteristics of New Journalism.....	4
3	Examples of New Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s:	
3.1	Tom Wolfe’s <i>The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test</i>	9
4	Current Works of New Journalism:	
4.1	David Sedaris’s “Me Talk Pretty One Day”	16
5	Creative Work: “Pandemic Pregnancy”	21
	Works Cited.....	32

1. Defining New Journalism

In the early to mid-twentieth century, the novel dominated the literary landscape in America. The novelist was the backbone of American society, they were the storytellers of their generations. It provided a way for those with extreme talent for storytelling to rise and become a part of the national consciousness. John Steinbeck, Willa Cather, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald became wildly popular in America because of the captivating stories they told. As Tom Wolfe puts it in his anthology *New Journalism*:

The Novel seemed like one of the last of those super strokes, like finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny...all the novelists seemed to be people who came blazing up into stardom from out of total obscurity. (8)

Fiction writing was a gold standard in American society, a way authors could analyze the world around them and make a lasting impression on their readers.

Things changed in the nineteen-sixties. New Journalists took the place of “novelists, the traditional chroniclers of society” who some claimed left their posts as America’s storytellers (Nicholson 55). Audiences around the country used the articles and books created in this movement to gauge the climate of American society. In spite of there being “no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a salon where the faithful gathered, since there was no faith and no creed,” the movement captured the soul of American culture at the time (Wolfe, *New Journalism* 23). New Journalism integrated the world of fiction with the tantalizing news stories of the day. In a sense, it took the traditional feature writing format and made it intimate (Wolfe, *New Journalism* 10). It packaged nonfiction stories in fiction casings, and in this way captured

the attention of readers. The tantalizing mix of “ethnography, investigative reportage, and fiction” gave way to the genre that has become an emblem of sixties culture (Staub 54). Like their contemporary fiction counterparts, New Journalists were able to capture the feelings of the sixties and seventies.

To understand New Journalism, it is essential to explore the social and political changes that the 1960s brought to American culture. The Vietnam Draft, the Civil Rights movement, Women’s Liberation, the Black Power Movement, Hippie counterculture, and prolific anti-war protests all wove themselves together in America’s social fabric (Nicholson 55). America was in a state of change, of radical push-back from the more conservative era of the nineteen-fifties. As Morris Dickstein puts it, “The social cataclysms of the sixties resembled not a conventional war with large-scale battles so much as a hundred small guerilla encounters in every corner of the country” (855). The American people were angry, and they were fighting pre-established notions of the social order for change. This was no different from the attitude that many journalists felt with the conservative and rigid journalism of the early nineteen-sixties. Their cynicism kept growing until reporters began to rebel even in established institutions, where they got their influences from the fashions and ideologies of the day (Dickstein 855-859). In other words, reporters were comprehending and flowing with the social changes of the times.

As Michael E. Staub puts it in his essay “Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties”:

It was...precisely the atmosphere of social crisis that had begun to make the general media seem so suspect and that called attention to the traditional media’s claim to be ‘objective’ was frequently a smokescreen for bias. (55)

New Journalists' dialogue with American society in the sixties and seventies drew wide audiences that were tired of false Vietnam reporting and wanted to know more about the general "intensification of domestic turmoil" that defined this period in American history (Staub 55). The New Journalism movement was creating a unique atmosphere never experienced in traditional news reporting, and it meshed well with the backdrop of the sixties and seventies. Their stories delivering "the truer story of the many crises splitting American society in the sixties" filtered through the perceptions of the reporter (Staub 55). Much like the social movements of the sixties and seventies, New Journalism strove to rebel against the establishment. As James Ridgeway states in his article "The New Journalism," "it represents a reaction...to the established mass circulation press and to the culture and politics that press represents" (585).

In this era, reporters were using elements of fiction to create a new, entertaining nonfiction that attempts to give readers an emotional, first-person viewpoint of the subject being tackled. This generally means that the reporter has to submerge him or herself into the life of their subjects for weeks at a time so that they can channel the emotional life of the people involved without subjectivity (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 11-15, 20). Even among critics like James Ridgeway, there is a sense that in-depth New Journalism reporting was overtaking society, even though he brands it as radical underground media. He says in his article "The New Journalism":

Journalism, the very best journalism, is not a business for professional technicians, but ought rather to be the natural evocation of every citizen in a democracy. And in that sense the underground radicals have created the basis for real revolutionary change. (592)

New Journalism created a movement in mass media because of its compelling qualities like point of view, episodic scenes, and realistic dialogue. Authors like Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and

Jimmy Breslin were able to break into the mainstream because of their poignant prose and ability to capture the complexities of their subjects with the same intensity as novelists during the same period.

2. The Characteristics of New Journalism

Journalists in the sixties and seventies had a unique era to report on. The seemingly unending social changes that were pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s made traditional reporting obsolete. This was the period of investigative journalism that brought down McCarthyism. The Black Power Movement, Richard Nixon, the Vietnam War, the Women's Liberation Movement, Hippie Counterculture—it was all happening in this miraculous era of change. Reporters like Tom Wolfe led the way in the fields. In the words of Marc Weingarten in his book *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, “they came to tell us stories about ourselves in ways that we couldn't, stories about the way life was being lived in the sixties and seventies and what it all meant” (6). Essentially, these authors took on the task of finding the core of the cultural movements of their times and writing about them. This was no easy feat. Even with techniques that made their stories undeniably page-turning, they were able to make meaningful social commentary with their subjects.

It is hard to completely distill the New Journalism movement down to just a few characteristics. Each writer had their own style and their own way of finding a story or the story to tell their audience. This research elucidates the tenets of reporting that Wolfe set up in his many writings on the New Journalism. He envisioned a nonfiction genre that captured the social make-up of the world much like the fiction from the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens, a prominent author from that period, “accurately portrayed their times in social realist fiction”

(Weingarten 10). This ambition is prevalent in Wolfe's explanation of the New Journalism movement, which he said borrows some from the Social Realist movement of the 1860s. Wolfe states that "Realism is a powerful device but is often of trivial interest unless it is used to illuminate a higher reality...the cosmic dimension...eternal values...the moral consciousness...a road that led them right back to the classical tradition by and by, to the idea that literature has a spiritual mission..." (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 40). This powerful element of fable, myth, and legend, as Wolfe calls it, is important for New Journalists to capture in their writing. Generally, New Journalism is characterized as having a strong social connection that illustrate the social scene of the event or people they are reporting on. Social Realism had the same goal, to express the social realities of the nineteenth century, but they were making up stories as opposed to reporting on real events (Weingarten 11).

Most writers of New Journalism aim to present a unique perspective of a movement. They want to capture what Wolfe calls the "status of life"—they are immersing themselves in the situation when writing their stories. New Journalism was one of the only forms of media, when compared to radio or film, that could capture this essence without being overt. Great New Journalists have the ability to suggest things to the reader, to nudge them to the truth as opposed to forcing it upon them (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 48- 49). It is one of the core tenets of the movement, and every piece of nonfiction from the sixties or seventies tries to capture it in some way or another. Authors were expected to "cut a wide swath through culture"—these reporters were detailing the realities of anything from gambling in Las Vegas to housekeepers in New York City (Weingarten 97). New Journalists had to capture a level of realism by giving assiduous attention to their subjects to create a successful piece. New Journalists sought extensive interviews and prolonged stays with the movements and people they were covering in

their stories. As John Hellman states in his article “Fables of Fact: New Journalism Reconsidered,” “the new journalist...need only convince on the basis of verifiable sources and his personal integrity” (417). That is, New Journalists use reporting: extensive interviews, long stays with their subjects, and research materials to establish credibility in their stories.

When writing *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote said he crafted the story he felt was closest to fact. It took him six years to complete the process, which involved multiple interviews with the same subjects until Capote felt that he had the truth. He did not use tape recorders or take notes because he said they detracted from the nature of interviewing someone face to face. Instead, he spent hours after the interview typing up the conversation from memory (Weingarten 31). In New Journalism, reporters concentrate on knowing their subjects to capture their perceptions of their situations. By dedicating themselves to defining their subjects’ perceptions through their extensive reporting, New Journalists create stories that captivate readers. Wolfe said, “the really unique thing about [New Journalism] ... was the reporting,” which New Journalists captured point of view, complex settings, and dialogue (*The New Journalism*, 12). These elements were generally thought of as key components of literature and New Journalists integrated them in nonfiction writing. Interviewing and sometimes even living with their subjects allowed for the reporters “to reconstruct the events being depicted and even reconstruct the state of the participants’ minds. The resulting narratives include portrayals of events that are so vivid as to imply that their narrators were eyewitnesses” (Worthington 98). These interviews, spread out over a long period of time, allowed for New Journalists to approximate the subject’s perspective as closely as possible. In other words, in-depth reporting gave them the ability to choose the point of view or points of view that created the most true interpretation of the story.

Thus, point of view is a key characteristic of the New Journalism movement. These works often “experiment with first- and third- person narration and feature the prominent intrusion of an author- character into the narrative” (Worthington 95). New Journalists like Wolfe were aware that whether they were inserted into the story or not, their biases would be present in their reporting. Reporters accepted that the perspective and biases of the author could never really be eliminated even in nonfiction writing, so they included themselves as narrators in their work and made readers intrinsically aware of their presence in the story (Worthington 99). First-person point of view allows them to portray the subjects without the façade of objectivity. In a sense, first-person point of view allows for the reporter to reveal biases.

Third-person narration is also used in New Journalism. Wolfe was widely known for switching point of view within his stories. He “would shift as quickly as possible into the eye sockets, as it were, of the people in the story. Often [he] would shift the point of view in the middle of a paragraph or even a sentence” (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 18). Jumping between points of view is facilitated by the leg work that New Journalists do when interviewing their subjects. The process gives them a deep understanding of the situations of their subjects and a view of their subject’s world. The movement was focused on reconstructing that world as their subjects saw it, making them so vivid it almost makes it seem like the reporter was actually there (Worthington 98). By creating scenes through the eyes of their subjects, New Journalism replaced the more detached tone of earlier nonfiction work. They would do “anything to avoid coming on like the usual nonfiction narrator, with a hush[ed] voice, like a radio announcer at a tennis match” (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 17). It was imperative that the story was not only informative but entertaining. The rigorous interview process also allowed for New Journalists to use the literary elements of setting and dialogue to enhance their subjects’ stories.

Dialogue and setting are crucial in creating the world of the subject. This is best exemplified in Jimmy Breslin's work in the early sixties. His work stood out because Breslin used the time before an event to "gather the off-camera material," the backstory, and in this way incorporated dialogue and setting (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 14). Reporting like Breslin's gained popularity by giving readers more than just the event itself but a story around it. Dialogue went a long way in helping to develop characters and bring the events to life in a way that traditional inverted-pyramid reporting could not capture (Weingarten 77).

New Journalism relies on realistic dialogue, setting, a point of view, and social status commentary yet New Journalists can channel a range of different styles in their writing. Each of the most prominent figures in the New Journalism movement has their own style. As Weingarten puts it in *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight*:

Is New Journalism the participatory gonzo journalism of Hunter S. Thompson? Jimmy Breslin's impressionistic rogue's tales? Tom Wolfe's jittery gyroscopic prose? The answer is that it's journalism that reads like fiction and rings with the truth of reported fact. It is, to borrow the title of a 1997 anthology of literary journalism, the art of fact. (7)

New Journalism is literary nonfiction that can undertake whatever guise the author chooses to tell the story. For a New Journalist like Wolfe this means using different types of punctuation including exclamation points, dashes, and italics that "helped give the illusion not only of people talking but of a person thinking" (Wolfe, *The New Journalism* 21-22). For others this means imitating the process of developing the feeling of being part of the events. New Journalists can change the way readers view the world around them through these techniques (Weingarten 6).

Tom Wolfe describes his own writing process in developing *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* in the introduction to *The New Journalism*:

It is hard to say what it was like. It was a garage sale, that piece... vignettes, odds and ends of scholarship, bits of memoir, short bursts of sociology, apostrophes, epithets, moans, cackles, anything that came into my head, much of it thrown together in a rough and awkward way. That was its virtue. It showed me the possibility of there being something 'new' in journalism. What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that—plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream of consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space...to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.

(The New Journalism, 15)

New Journalism is molded by the journalist. Realistic dialogue, setting, point of view used to present the social situation of the subject, are the basic characteristics of New Journalism.

Reporters have the freedom to pick and choose the elements they emphasize and the format. New Journalism may be summed up as an intoxicating blend of fiction and non-fiction.

3. Examples of New Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s:

3.1 Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

One of the major triumphs of the New Journalism movement was Wolfe's work with Ken Kesey, the novelist who is best-known for *One Who Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Kesey's Merry Pranksters. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is Wolfe's observations of the group and chronicles their beginnings to their end. Wolfe spent months following Kesey's gang around California. He interviewed everyone to understand the long journey they had

taken from their humble beginnings at parties in Kesey's Palo Alto home. He watched the 40 hours of footage that the Merry Pranksters recorded on their road trip to New York (Schafer 62). The story follows Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters creating new experiences while high on LSD. Wolfe documents that the Pranksters' created a hierarchy where "you're either on the bus...or off the bus" (Wolfe 83). As Wolfe presents it, the Pranksters follow Kesey who sets the goals for the common communal good. In the descriptions of Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, Wolfe describes the Acid Movement of the mid to late sixties for a wider audience. Their actions are catalogued, chronicled, and analyzed by Wolfe and presented through the points of view of key figures, vivid settings, and complex dialogue that result in a complex depiction of the Acid Movements beginnings.

The story starts with Kesey's return from prison for marijuana possession. Wolfe includes himself in the narrative. He uses imagery to set himself apart from the Day-Glo Pranksters, describing himself as wearing a "blue silk blazer and a big tie with clowns on it and...a...pair of shiny lowcut black shoes" (Wolfe 3). Wolfe is not "on the bus" but rather is an observer of their lifestyle. His first-person account of the subject is presented as the voice of an everyday American.

Once Wolfe has defined his narrative voice, he shifts to the Prankster parables. Wolfe describes Kesey's explanation of their aversion to police officers. Wolfe writes:

And that's what the cops-and-robbers game does to you. Only it is me thinking it. Figuring out parables, I look around at the faces and they are all watching Kesey, and I have not the slightest doubt, thinking: and that's what the cops-and-robbers game does to you. Despite the skepticism I brought here, I am suddenly experiencing their feeling. I am sure of it. I feel like I am in on something the

outside world, the world I came from, could not possibly comprehend, and it was a metaphor, the whole scene, ancient and vast, vaster than... (*The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, 27)

Wolfe having defined his narrative voice, makes Kesey's explanation seem credible to readers. They can believe the description of the social setting in which Kesey and the Pranksters live, the fascination of the Merry Pranksters, and the charisma of Kesey. Wolfe describing himself, through first-person point of view, being enticed by the thought patterns of Kesey and the Pranksters provides the reader access to their movement. Wolfe presents them as people from predominately middle-class backgrounds who come to the Pranksters attracted by a sense of community.

The credibility that Wolfe creates in the first few chapters of *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* allows for him to shift narrative strategies, taking out his own point of view as he uses the narrative voices of members of the group to recount the beginnings of the Pranksters. At times, Wolfe jumps into the minds of the Pranksters involved making it seem like he was there witnessing the whole thing. Although the story is centered around Kesey, he is not a main figure of the story. The Pranksters' ideology revolves around his thoughts and his guidance, but he seems to be an elusive ambiguous god figure that everyone attempts to define. His will alters the Pranksters' trajectory and his presence is an essential part of the "on or off the bus" motto they have adopted. Wolfe outlines this for the reader, taking a more traditional nonfiction approach to Kesey's life before the Pranksters. In the chapter entitled "What Do You Think of My Buddah?," Wolfe describes the vast majority of Kesey's life in the style of a biography. A prime example of this is when Wolfe states:

Kesey was soaring on LSD and his sense of time was wasted, and thousands of thoughts per second were rapping around between synapses, fractions of a second, so what the hell is a minute—but then one thought stuck in there, held...*ma-li-cious*, *de-li-cious*. He remembered that his pulse had been running 75 beats per minute.

Kesey is a far more elusive subject than his band of Pranksters. Wolfe maintains a critical distance, often falling back on the guise of traditional nonfiction reporting. Although Kesey is the leader, he is described with ambiguity. If Wolfe were to try to dive into his thought processes, to see the world from Kesey's perspective Wolfe would lose the critical distance and audience trust that he has established. By leaving Kesey a mystical figure, Wolfe is able to dive into the social background of the participants without having to explain the irrational underpinnings of the movement.

Wolfe uses different points of view, second person singular then third person, to imitate the effects of acid on the subjects being described. One example is Wolfe's description of one Prankster's experience with the drug:

Sandy is still *Dis-mount*, still getting off the bus continually, and why? You don't understand, says Sandy. You don't understand my dis-mounting. It's like climbing a mountain. Would you rather climb the mountain or have a helicopter deposit you on top? The continual climb, the continual remounting, makes it a richer experience and so on. Kesey nods in a somewhat abstracted way and says O.K. Sandy...

But Sandy feels paranoid...what do they really think of him? What are they planning? What insidious prank? He can't get it out of his mind that they are

building up to some prank of enormous proportions, at his expense. A Monstrous Prank...He can't sleep, his brain keeps going at the furious speed of the bus on the road, like an eternal trip on speed. (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 114-115).

Wolfe uses indirect discourse to capture Sandy's voice and experience here and in several other chapters. Through this device, he presents an interior monologue rendering of Sandy's experience on LSD. In a way, Wolfe presents an LSD-less acid trip. The rapid shift in point of view recreates the out of body experience that the Pranksters felt when they were using acid.

Wolfe later uses a distanced third person narration to expose the deep flaws and complexities of the movement. Unlike in the other chapters where Wolfe uses an episodic style and varying narrative voices, here he embodies a third person narration more commonly used in conventional journalism. He uses a sociological discourse to present the Pranksters' community as a cult. Kesey's and the Pranksters' philosophy is described as dividing a society at large:

The world was simply and sheerly divided into 'the aware,' those who had the experience of being vessels of the divine, and a great mass of the 'unaware,' 'the unmusical,' 'the unattuned.' Or: you're either on the bus or off the bus. (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 129)

Wolfe uses hyperbole to explain the Pranksters' ideologies to the audience. Here he compares their movement to those of prophets like Moses, Jesus, and Buddha who are central figures to major worldwide religions. The Pranksters' philosophies are not on the same scale as Christianity or Buddhism. The over exaggeration of the "on the bus or off the bus" narrative helps to contextualize the movement in American culture. Wolfe is

suggesting that the Pranksters' viewed this ideology and their leader Kesey the same way Christian's view biblical principles and Jesus. It is clear, though, that Kesey is not a prophet and the Pranksters are a cult not a religion.

Although Wolfe breaks down the religious elements of the Pranksters in a conventional journalistic style, their own personal beliefs are revealed to the reader through dialogue and setting. One of the most poignant moments in Wolfe's depiction of Kesey is at an Anti-War rally in Berkeley. Here the Pranksters collide with other movements that were popular at the time like "the New Left, the Free Speech Movement," and the Anti-Vietnam movement (Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* 216). The reader is introduced to Kesey's political philosophy with direct quotations from his speech:

*You know, you're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching...That's what they do...They hold rallies and they march...They've been having wars for ten thousand years and you're not going to stop it this way...Ten thousand years and this is the game they play to do it...holding rallies and having marches...and that's the same game your playing...their game (Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* 222).*

The speech is in italics. Wolfe lets Kesey's own words depict his selfish and pretentious character. He repeatedly shoots blame at the crowd, addressing them as "you" like he is a scolding parent. He is depicted as believing that he is better than everyone at the protest because he can see that marching is "not gonna stop this war." Kesey presents this information as fact, that he and the Pranksters' are "better" because they can see through

societal roles. Wolfe suggests that Kesey sees himself as a prophet, like he has been tasked with bringing people into enlightenment.

Later in the book, Wolfe uses point of view in an entirely new way at the. He switches from his own narrative to a direct first-person account of the events. Most of the night is relayed by a reporter who had no previous experience with LSD and had no idea that the Kool-Aid was laced when she drank it. In the chapter, she states:

‘There was one girl who was wrestling with God. She was with friends, and I think she was all right after a few hours. There was one man who became completely withdrawn...I want to say catatonic, because we tried to bring him out of it , and could not make contact at all...he was sort of a friend of mine and I had some responsibility for getting him back to town...he had a previous history of mental hospitals, lack of contact with reality, ect., and when I realized what had happened, I begged him not to drink the Kool-Aid, but he did...and it was very bad. There are the only two people that I know of who did have bad experiences, but I’m sure I wasn’t in contact with everyone.

I told you about the tape recording (‘Who Cares?...I don’t care...’) and how it was used again at the next one. Show biz.’ (Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* 278).

Wolfe shifts the narrative voice from third person to first-person with the reporters first-hand account. Wolfe was not at the event, so he relies on another voice to bring an outsider’s point of view. The reporter is able to depict the event for people who had never taken LSD before because the event was her first experience with the drug. The scene is presented in first-person past tense, creating a bond between the reader and the reporter.

This connection is important for Wolfe to establish because the Kool-Aid Acid Test is a pivotal moment in the Acid Movement, and he needed a first-person account to recreate the immediacy and the newness of the experience.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test is a work that effectively combines narrative strategies with traditional reporting to create an intricate look at Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. Wolfe often shifts point of view. He effortlessly switches from second-person singular to third person to describe the effects of LSD. He successfully uses a distanced third person point of view in a more traditional journalism style to explain the Pranksters. Wolfe changes to another journalist's account of the Kool-Aid Acid Test to provide readers with a first-person account of events. Through Kesey's own speech, Wolfe characterizes Kesey as a pretentious and selfish leader. Wolfe uses New Journalism to craft an effective book on the beginnings of the Acid Movement.

4. New New Journalism: Literary Journalism in the Modern Era

4.1. "Me Talk Pretty One Day" by David Sedaris

Personal essays have borrowed heavily from the core characteristics of New Journalism. These relatively short nonfiction essays attempt to tell nonfiction stories from the point of view of the author, a detailed setting, realistic dialogue, and an attentive eye for social conditions in the society they are describing. Most of the time, these stories focus on the authors themselves, generally using a first-person point of view. Each author uses characteristics of New Journalism that makes them seem closer to short stories than conventional nonfiction essays.

David Sedaris is known for his comedic approach and his entertaining way of integrating realistic dialogue. “Me Talk Pretty One Day” tells of Sedaris’s time in Paris, when he was in his forties and trying to learn French with other foreign students. Sedaris uses realistic dialogue, setting, and point of view—all tenets of the New Journalism movement—to craft a hilarious story on the immersive language experience.

The essay opens with Sedaris setting the scene. He quickly relays his situation, his enrollment in the French language program in Paris. Sedaris states:

At the age of forty-one, I am returning to school and have to think of myself as what my French textbook calls ‘a true debutant.’ After paying my tuition, I was issued a student ID, which allows me a discounted entry fee at movie theaters, puppet shows, and Festyland, a far-flung amusement park that advertises with billboards picturing a cartoon stegosaurus sitting in a canoe and eating what appears to be a ham sandwich (181).

Sedaris immerses the reader in unique circumstances by describing the ridiculous elements of the experience, most notably the free admission to a theme park, and discounted puppet show tickets—something that seems more suitable to a child rather than a forty-something man who came to Paris to learn French. This section also helps to set the tone. Sedaris is poking fun at the situation he has found himself in, the people that are involved, and his own reactions to the people in the story. Sedaris uses first-person present tense in the first sentence to create a sense of immediacy. He “is” forty, not “was” forty. It places the reader in the context of the setting. Sedaris is an older man who finds himself in the situation as a young college student. The first-person present point of view brings Sedaris’s setting to the forefront of the story. When he begins to relay his

experiences in class, he uses first-person past tense. Through point of view, Sedaris illustrates time passing but also the state of these unchanging circumstances. The events of the essay happen in first-person past tense but the use of the present tense in the first paragraph suggests that Sedaris is in Paris when he is writing the essay.

Sedaris is a master of dialogue. He incorporates translated instances that are both jarring and hilarious as he and his classmates struggle to understand their teacher's fast-paced talking and insults. The teacher asks them to introduce themselves and provide their names, nationalities, occupations, and a brief list of the things that they both liked and disliked in the world. One student said that she did not like the mosquito. The teacher responded with "How very interesting, I thought that everyone loved the mosquito, but here, in front of all the world, you claim to detest him. How is it that we've been blessed with someone as unique and original as you? Tell us, please" (183). Sedaris translates the line, but he imitates the venomous tone of the French teacher. Sedaris says that the student "did not understand what was being said but knew that this was an occasion for shame" (183). Through his use of dialogue, Sedaris effectively characterizes the diction of the French teacher. Sedaris chooses his words carefully to recreate the scene as he remembers it. The overall effect of repeating the "how" phrase in the teacher's retort to the student reflects passive aggressive disapproval.

Sedaris captures both accents and foreign language in this short piece, adding to the authenticity of the experience for readers. When Sedaris does not know what the teacher has said, he fills in the unknown word with random letters like unintelligible speech. Sedaris uses the incorrect article for "typewriter" and the teacher says, "Even a fuiscrzsa ticiwelmun knows that a typewriter is feminine" (185). Sedaris uses nonwords

to imitate his experience for the reader, mimicking Sedaris's own confusion when the teacher is talking to him and satirizing the event. The nonwords are essential to understanding the sentence: they act as a hyperbole of the actual French words that the teacher uses. Sedaris presenting the unknown French as nonwords makes them look ridiculous, like the teacher slips into moments of complete gibberish. Through hyperbole, Sedaris captures his experience.

Although most of Sedaris's classmates come from other countries, they are able to give each other solace by talking in English after class. One even admits to crying alone at night over the class, to which another responds "That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People start loving you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay" (Sedaris 187). These moments are important in characterizing Sedaris's fellow classmates as compassionate people. Sedaris is showing, as opposed to telling, the reader that his fellow students are just as lost as he is in their French course. Although they come from a wide variety of countries and are able to speak more than one language, they are struggling in this French class too. The dialogue, written in dialect, highlights the importance of communication for all the students. They mutually bond and communicate their sorrows through broken English. The students are much more bonded than in a traditional classroom setting. Sedaris shows the audience that they rely on each other's guidance and compassion to get through the trials of the French classroom.

The end of this essay highlights first-person point of view. Sedaris describes that, after months of not being able to fully understand his professor, he can finally translate a whole sentence. He admits this is "a small step...yet its rewards are intoxicating and deceptive" (187). Although the reader feels the relief of Sedaris finally being able to

completely translate a single French sentence— “intoxicating,” they also know he is about to make a fool of himself— “deceptive.” He responds to his teacher’s insult with “I know the thing that you speak exact now. Talk me more, you, plus, please, plus” (187). There is a plethora of narrative strategies in Sedaris’s last sentence. The diction is well thought out and precise. Sedaris chooses words that point toward understanding without complete mastery. He uses “thing” and “speak exact” which are not descriptive or grammatically correct in the sentence. The effect is a proclamation that makes sense but does not sound like colloquial or coherent speech. Sedaris uses alliteration in the last few words, “plus, please, plus,” as a tool of emphasis. The words further highlight how far he has come in his ability to understand but how much his language skills have yet to develop. The effect is a feeling of modest elation for the audience because they can feel that triumph at the end, but they know that Sedaris still has a long way to go.

Sedaris crafts a funny story that immerses readers in his experience learning French. Through the use of first-person point of view, meticulous diction, and effective characterizations of people Sedaris creates an essay that is entertaining to read and enlightens the audience on the challenges of learning a second language. The first-person point of view, in both present and in past tense, helps Sedaris present the circumstances, and the atmosphere, and the voice to describe the outlandish French course. Sedaris carefully selects his diction in his recreations of dialogue with his use of nonwords when his teacher is talking to him, effectively representing his confusion. Sedaris utilizes dialect and incorrect grammar to depict stresses of their French class. Sedaris relies heavily on the characteristics of New Journalism.

4. **Creative Component: “Pandemic Pregnancy”**

April 9th, 2020

Day 29 of Social Distancing

I slowly browsed through a small assortment of maternity shirts until my fingers lingered on a burnt orange long sleeve top.

This one will do. It's not all that cold outside.

I squeezed my small cantaloupe belly into the shirt and assessed myself in the mirror. I looked absurdly round as I clicked the small round overall straps into their buttons. The sides barely closed, and my belly was awkwardly cut in half by the cloth belt panel in the middle of the shorts.

Yeah that's good enough. I look presentable. It's just the doctor's office.

At 19 weeks pregnant, in my small pre-baby overalls I was looking like I had just come off a Hostess Cupcake diet or had just finished a fifth Thanksgiving meal. They hugged my tiny basketball belly like a grandmother who hasn't seen their grandkids in years—too tight. I refused to accept that I had to give up my old clothes for stretchy pants and pajama bottoms. I was barely halfway to my due date. Why not enjoy my cute clothes while I could force myself into them?

I grabbed my purse from the bed and made my way to the kitchen. I wasn't hungry, but I knew I needed to eat. Last time I had made the mistake of going to the doctor on an empty stomach. I was fine until about 15 minutes into the appointment when my belly started to squeak, the gears unable to turn without some sustenance. I almost hit a pedestrian in the parking lot as I bee-lined my way home for some cereal. That was March 27th, the last time I ventured out into the outside world.

My fiancé, Daren, smiled warmly when I walked into the kitchen. He was still in his pajamas with his black hair standing up like uncut grass. The smell of sausage and eggs wafted

through the room. He danced around the stove to some groovy tune played on the Google Home, placing paper plates by the two barstools that surrounded the stainless steel island. “You hungry?”

“Nah, I’ll eat some sausage though.”

“You sure? I can make you a little scramble scramble. Or a cheese and onion omelet? Anything your heart desires.”

I laughed and grabbed a patty from the paper plate. “No thank you sir. I just want some sausage sir. The doctor is about to push on my belly sir. That be a big problem for me and little Ollie.”

“Oh yes ma’am. Eat whatever you want ma’am. We will leave in 20 minutes”

“You got the face masks?” I said with a mouth full of sausage patty. “What about the gloves?”

“Face masks are in the car. No gloves but we got some liquid gold girl...Purr-ell!”

We both laughed and I tried my best to prop myself up on the barstool. With all the extra baby weight, it was extremely difficult to maneuver in seats higher than my hips. I couldn’t jump anymore, and my knees hated gravity more with each passing day. The nerves had started to settle in. The pandemic had taken most of the excitement out of doctor’s appointments and my mind often wandered into unlikely situations where I would be in contact with someone who was infected with no symptoms. There were only about 20 confirmed cases in the county by then, but I was still on edge. It seemed like anyone could be a potential carrier or a threat.

The panic came more in waves now than it did a month ago when everything started to close down. I used to read news stories on the latest developments of the coronavirus every day and sit on my couch worried that I would have to schedule a home birth for Ollie as the cases in

the US grew exponentially every day. The videos of dead bodies from countries like Spain and Italy piling up in mass burials made me cry. I'd lay down and look at valleys and rivers in our old ceiling trying to find something else to occupy my mind. Eventually, the worry subsided a bit. I followed the CDC's guidelines of staying inside and I pretended that everything was fine. I worked out a routine with my remaining course work for my senior year of college, I watched Disney movies, and I ate ice cream by the pint. Every time I thought of the world outside of our two-bedroom townhouse I found myself in a spiral of fear and worry.

Would the hand sanitizer be enough? Would the ill-fitting masks really protect me from dangerous particles that could be lingering in the air? Did I disinfect that doorknob? Have I washed my hands enough? When will we run out of face masks? I will not touch my face. I will not touch my face. Why was I so tied up in what I was going to wear to the doctor's office? I should have been more worried about completely covering my body from germs.

Daren slid onto the stool beside me, eating his cheesy omelet with gusto. He had no idea I was slowly descending into a small panic attack. I was leaving my clean bubble for the first time in weeks and the reality was slowly starting to set in.

“Hey babe, is that what your wearing? Can you get it on and off easy enough? I mean this is an ultrasound appointment, right?”

I looked down at my tight overalls and thought about how long it had taken me to pick out the outfit. It was too tight, too revealing. My thighs and legs were completely open to bacteria. Not only that, but it would be hard for me to lay in the ultrasound room with my overalls pinching at my butt. I slowly nodded, getting up from the island to change again. “Oh yeah, I should just change. This was a bad idea.”

Daren looked mortified, he stopped eating and looked at me the same way someone looks at a lost puppy. “Oh no, babe. I didn’t mean you had to change. You look great! I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

I was already up and on my way to the bedroom at this point. He was right. What was I thinking? “No worries. I’ll just put on those stretchy maternity jeans. It’ll only take a second.”

He tried to say something in rebuttal, but I was already in the bedroom. I lifted the stretchy jeans from a basket of laundry laying on the floor and sighed. It was no time for cute little overalls.

On our way to the doctor, we started to suit up in our small amounts of medical gear—black face masks that hugged the nose but flared out around the chin, one huge blue latex glove I found in the side of the passenger door, and my handy dandy travel Purell. We were ready. I should say I was ready. Daren was not allowed to accompany me to the appointment because of new hospital restrictions on visitors. They were only allowed in for extreme circumstances such as end of life care or for deliveries. He would be there in spirit though. He would just have to wait in the car until the appointment was over.

Daren turned to me as we pulled into the mostly deserted hospital parking lot. “Okay so you’re ready? I’ll just be in the car, right outside the building.”

“Yes, I am as ready as I’ll ever be. I’ll video call you from Facebook when they call me back for the ultrasound. Make sure you can get some signal so you can see Ollie.”

“Roger. No problem ma’am. Just be safe. I love you”

“I love you”

We slid our protective masks down for one last kiss. Those thin layers of cloth had become our safety blankets and we wore them anytime we were outside of the house. Did we need to? No, but not wearing them to make us feel like we were not exposing ourselves to the great unknown.

Daren had pulled up right by the front doors, so it wouldn't be too far of a walk for me. I shimmied my face mask over my nose and mouth and hurried out onto the sidewalk by the main entrance.

BANG! I was all alone. Daren took the car into the parking structure across the tiny hospital street and I quickly walked into the hospital. The doors were automatic, so no touching involved. No other patients arrived with me. It was just me and a small table with two nurses decked out in protective equipment. Their blue face masks hugged close to their faces, and their gloved hands hovered over the check-in stickers. I could only see two patient categories—doctor's appointment and emergency.

I couldn't help but think about Daren's job. He had recently started as a salesperson for a national manufactured home business and he was considered an essential employee. He had to meet people, day in and day out, who threw caution to the wind. I had heard the stories. People refusing to stay six feet away from him during tours. Their venomous anger at the virus "hoax" everyone was buying into that they directed at my fiancé when he told them they had to fill out an application before coming into the building. We had taken steps to make sure he was safe—face masks, hand sanitizer, Lysol by the door for his shoes, a changing station by the washing machine for his clothes.

What if all those precautions were not enough? Could either of us be sick?

The CDC said most people don't show symptoms for a few days. Some don't show any symptoms at all.

Are we carriers?

“What are you here for?”

Their voices startled me. I couldn't tell which one had spoken. I guess it didn't matter who I responded to, but in the moment, I felt like a kid who had been called to the principal's office for being out of dress code.

“Umm, I am here for an ultrasound at the OBGYN office.”

They looked me up and down. I tried to smile but I realized they couldn't see my mouth.

“Have you experienced any fever? Dry cough? Shortness of breath in the last 24 hours?”

“No.” It felt like a trick question.

Was I really sick and I didn't even know it? I did get out of breath the other day when I tried to do some light yoga... Should I mention that?

I fought against the urge to tell them about my embarrassing stint in exercise because it was normal in pregnancy to feel that way. I just needed to get to the doctor's office.

“Okay ma'am. Thank you, here is your sticker. Feel free to use the hand sanitizing stations anytime you need to. The OBGYN office is to your left. Just follow signs for building three.”

“Thank you. Have a great day and stay safe,” I told them after sticking my DR. APPNT sticker on my chest. I grabbed a dab of hand sanitizer as I speed-walked through the maze of cramped hallways to building three. I ran into a few elderly patients making their way out of physical therapy sessions and I tried my best to squeeze against the far wall as I passed them. My face was starting to sweat profusely now because the face mask was trapping the warmth of my

breath in its cloth fibers. I had shoved the still unused latex glove in my jean pocket for the door handle, the only thing I would have to touch on the way to my doctor's office, that I knew was coming up.

I passed one more check-in table by a closed-off entrance to building three. It looked like the hospital was trying their best to keep all patients going through the main doors for safety, but this table stood on its own by a door marked with red DO NOT ENTER signs. The nurses manning the table looked more laid back. They were wearing civilian clothes and surrounded by tall towers of hand sanitizer, laughing at some private joke. I thought they were there as extra security, people who would question my intent and take my temperature before going into the pediatrics wing. But I guess they were just there to monitor nurses or doctors returning to work because they didn't even bat an eye. I sped past them before they could change their minds.

When I reached the dark wooden doors of Contemporary OBGYN, I tried to slow my breathing. I felt like I had run from the main entrance to these double doors out of pure fear like a rabbit running from an invisible fox. The place seemed to be crawling with germs, every surface having the potential of making me sick or making someone else sick. I quickly grabbed the latex glove out of my pocket and put it on my right hand. The huge blue glove was at least three sizes too big for my tiny hands and my fingers slipped when I pinched the door handle. The slick latex combined with my already sweaty hands to create a bunched up blue mess that clung awkwardly to my palm. My fingers didn't even make it halfway into their designated slots.

Just a little bit more, why the hell did I run all the way here?

I am not strong by any means, but the thick oak door was heavier than I remembered. The few people waiting in the lobby could see my fight from the other side of the large, door-length windowpanes but they didn't dare to help me. We had to keep our distance from each other.

After what seemed like three minutes of tussling with the doorknob, I finally got the door open wide enough for me to enter. I rushed to the trashcan to throw away my glove, that damned beast that had saved my life nonetheless, and made my way awkwardly to the reception area to check-in. The nurse looked directly at me; her blue eyes highlighted by her crème colored mask. “Name please?”

“Sam. Uh, Sam Bainer.”

“Alright sweetie, I’ve got you checked in. We will call you back when we are ready.”

When I turned to look at the waiting room it was even fuller than normal. In the past, for my early afternoon appointments I generally had empty lobbies but this time there was at least five people waiting for appointments. Three moms-to-be, like me, were wearing face masks of varying styles and toting bottles of hand sanitizer. Two older women had their faces fully exposed, no hand sanitizer, and a mean look in their eye. The office was practicing the six feet apart rule, but they really didn’t have to enforce it. The majority of my pregnant peers seemed to want to stay as far away from others as possible. One older pregnant woman scoffed at me as I laid down my jacket before sitting on one of the couches. I had no idea what I did to offend her, but I tried not to make any more eye contact with her. I didn’t want to invite conversations or arguments.

I texted Daren.

Mission accomplished. We are ready for lift off partner.

Roger, roger. Still trying to find service.

Take your time! I ain’t even worried. It might be a min before they call me back anyways.

sweeeeee. I love you so much. Be careful out there momma

Yes sir. I love you so much. See you on the other side.

A few people were called ahead of me. I sat on my jacket on the very edge of the couch, careful to not let any parts of my clothing touch the upholstery. I slopped on a small helping of hand sanitizer every few minutes to keep my hands busy. By now, they looked like shiny plastic in the florescent lighting. I had put so much on that the smell of the alcohol started to make my eyes water. I tried my best to rub the sanitizer in, but my hands couldn't absorb any more. Small pools of clear alcohol gathered in the webs of my fingers. So, I sat there waving my hands to air dry the glistening sheen off of them. Everyone was staring.

That's when they called my name.

I stood up quickly and crammed my things into my arms. I darted to the door to the examination rooms and tried to put on my best act for the ultrasound nurse. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

"Okay great Ms. Bainer. Let's go on back then."

It looked like she smiled under her sky-blue face mask, but I couldn't really tell. She led me to one of the ultrasound rooms by the nurses' station. The room was dark except for a few recessed lights and the glow from the huge monitor on the wall opposite the examination table. There were a few chairs and an ottoman next to the table for family members to watch but they were eerily vacant this time around. The old butt indentations were gone. They probably hadn't been used in weeks.

I plopped my things down on the side chair closest to the table and I fumbled in my purse to find my phone. "I hope you don't mind. I am going to call my fiancé. He's in the parking lot waiting but I want him to see the baby too."

“No problem. I’m just going to get situated here,” she motioned to the large ultrasound machine and stool to the left of the table. “Take your time. Just tuck this towel under your waistband when you’re ready to start.”

“Okay thank you.” I fired up Facebook Messenger while getting situated on the table. I tucked the towel into my stretchy jeans, hit Daren’s icon, and pressed video call.

“Hello, can you see me?” Daren’s grainy face appeared on the screen. He was still wearing his mask.

“Yes, we are ready to go.” I flipped the camera so Daren could see the monitor. “Can you see the monitor okay?”

The ultrasound nurse pressed my belly with the oddly warm goop and Ollie lit up the screen.

“Aw look at how big our guy is,” we both said in near unison. Oliver was active, he kept rolling around in his womb-y world. Sometimes we could see his foot, or his butt, or a slew of black and white colors that looked like a Rorschach Ink Blot Test.

“So today we are just going to check to see if he is developing okay. I’m going to try my best to locate all of his organs but he’s pretty active today so this could take a minute.”

The nurse looked hard at the screen while Daren and I cooed from audience.

“Is that the heart? My boy’s got a strong heart.”

Oliver had leg bones, kidneys, a bladder, all four chambers of the heart, a fully developed spine, a brain, little eyes, a diaphragm—it was incredible to think that he had just been a tiny sack of cells and a yolk sack just 10 weeks before.

He was rowdy. A baby my mom would call ornery. He would not sit still for pictures. My uterus was his jungle gym and he was loving every minute of it. I could see that he liked to hook his feet on the top of my womb and kick off—propelling himself in circles.

I quickly forgot about the pandemonium. I didn't even care about the face mask or the Purell scent that was still radiating from my hands. I was entranced by Oliver. His movements made my belly lurch and I could see his tiny fingers press against the walls of my womb. Daren's small bursts of laughter and hiccups of glee reminded me that at least I had him and Ollie by my side. Even if it was through a pixelated portrait, Daren was there, and we were experiencing the happy acrobatics of our son together. Ollie's crafty movements to evade the ultrasound nurse made me feel like I was full of warm fizzy bubbles. I felt like a huge weight lift off my shoulders like I was floating with Ollie. We were going to make a great family one day.

"He's a happy, healthy boy" the nurse said as I was making my way out of the room. "You guys stay safe out there."

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