

MY QUEST FOR MY (SOUTHERN) VOICE IN NARRATIVE WRITING

By WADE LIVINGSTON

When I was a child, my father would sometimes bring up The Great Southern Novel he'd always wanted to write but hadn't yet managed to.

The details are fuzzy, but I remember the protagonist being a poor, small-town man who'd somehow made a go of it in politics and risen to power in South Carolina. I'm sure that character took shape from my father's life: He was raised in the town of North, South Carolina, by my grandmother — a nurse — and my grandfather — who farmed and worked at a screen-door manufacturing plant — before earning his doctorate in political science from Ole Miss. Academia was so foreign to his extended family that some relatives assumed Dr. Livingston practiced medicine.

My father never ventured into politics, and I'm not sure what became of his protagonist. But I can't forget the name he gave to the novel swirling around in his head: "A Voice in the Southern Wind."

For the better part of a year, I've thought a lot about voice and the South — from the perspective of a narrative nonfiction writer. In the spring of 2015, as a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, I set out on a quest.

I was trying to find the intersection between craft and culture: narrative nonfiction writing wrapped in a Southern voice. I talked to accomplished journalists from the South to learn how they approached writing, and to see how — if — their Southern roots influence their work. As a young journalist who strongly identifies as

a Southerner, I was trying to find my writing voice. That was the purpose of this quest.

On some levels I suppose my quest will resonate with any writer. It's an exploration of the mechanics and influences that render voice, why a person's writing sounds ... personal. On another level it was a lonely journey, one that sought a distinctive blueprint I could follow.

It was motivated by the need to belong.

The notion of belonging is a universal human condition — I think it's safe to say that.

For me, belonging means you see a larger world that exists outside yourself. It means you're not alone. It implies connection: You sacrifice individualism in return for membership, bonds with people, places and ideas. And if you truly belong, it's affirming — because you know you've been accepted. That you're worthy.

Never have I felt the need to know I'm worthy more so than during the past couple of years. In 2013 at the age of 31, I quit a tenure-track faculty job at Clemson University to go back to school to train as a journalist. I had no journalism experience. As a journalist might say, I had zero street cred.

I'd known for a while that I didn't belong in academia, though I tried several years to convince myself otherwise. Looking back now, I think it's because I felt like I didn't have a voice, or the right (academic) voice. Sure, there were the politics that went along with being a junior tenure-track professor, but I never felt disenfranchised or anything. It was more about the subject matter: I wasn't

passionate about higher education administration, the discipline in which I earned my doctorate. And I certainly wasn't passionate about writing about it, especially the way I felt forced to write about it.

You've likely read 30-page academic journal articles that are full of jargon and theory. And hard to read. I'm not belittling academic writing: It serves a purpose within the academy, and some folks are really good at it. But it tends to remain trapped in the Ivory Tower.

If I'm honest, I've always wanted my voice to be heard by a wider audience. For someone who writes better than he talks, writing has always been my preferred medium. But that medium — wrapped in academic-speak and rendered in 30-page journal articles — became tedious. I found myself trying to sound like all the other scholars. I saw in front of me the promise of tenure, a comfortable life, and I got scared that I'd lose myself — my voice — if I pursued it. So, I made a career change. It was freeing. It was intimidating — scary, even. I had to prove myself all over again.

In the spring of 2015, after about two years of reporting and writing, newspaper and magazine internships and coursework in the craft, I realized I belonged as a journalist.

But as I started conceptualizing my master's project — the final hurdle standing in the way of that Mizzou diploma — I began reflecting on my life's narrative, what it was and what I wanted it to be. I realized how deeply my identity as a Southerner affected that narrative, and how much I wanted the South to be

present in my work. I wanted to identify — belong — as A Southern Writer, and that meant I had to hone a Southern voice. Or so I thought.

But four expert guides challenged my thinking.

Pate McMichael, Chuck Reece, Wright Thompson and Tommy Tomlinson are narrative nonfiction writers from the South. They write about things I'm interested in: sports, culture, food, people, history, the South. And, like me, they're white men who've reflected on the region's beauty and blight.

They taught me a lot about narrative writing. They spoke to the South's influence on their work. And they pushed back when I asked if a distinctive Southern writing voice exists — of course it doesn't. And that's freeing.

Wright Thompson was in New Orleans when I telephoned him in June. The 38-year-old Clarksburg, Mississippi, native was in line ordering a coffee when I asked him how he defines voice. He, in turn, asked the barista.

"It's your signature," Thompson said, relaying the barista's response. We agreed it was a good answer. Coffee in hand, Thompson left the barista and contemplated the question himself.

He talked about "voicely writers" (naming John Jeremiah Sullivan and Tom Junod) writers whose work you'd recognize without their byline. He said "I don't know" a couple of times. The question and its follow-up — How did you develop your voice? — seemed to irritate him. He said he doesn't actively think about the voice of the piece; he just worries whether he can do the damn story.

During the past 17 years, Thompson has written about Michael Jordan and Ted Williams, the 2014 World Cup and the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. He's authored TV pieces for ESPN, and he edited "The Best American Sports Writing 2015." He's won awards for his narrative nonfiction but, as he says, "none that matter" (meaning a Pulitzer or a National Magazine Award). He'll tell you he's written some pieces he's proud of and a lot of stories he hates.

"I struggled for a really long time to just strip away everything" — he'd later specify simile and metaphor — "and when I go back and read it now, you can just see someone at a keyboard typing," he said. "And I hate that. Where it feels like pyrotechnics for pyrotechnics sake."

"I have literally never, ever, put in a single amount of thought to developing my voice, although I do always strive for sort of an authenticity" (Authenticity, he said, is avoiding colloquialisms and "cute little jokes" and alliteration — stuff that's "hack-ish.")

As an undergraduate at the University of Missouri, Thompson took a class on 19th century American literature. The class focused on sense of place as a character in story. Sense of place is evident in his stories, he said, which makes sense as he's someone "from a place with a strong sense of place."

"Absolutely," the South has a strong sense of place, he said: "It's one of the very few places left in America where culture is defined inside-out and not outside-in." But Thompson took issue with the notion of a distinctive Southern writing voice. That's something English majors would talk about, he said, adding that they'd probably say Southern writers "write like poor people."

Which is “condescending and bullshit,” he said. And trying to write like a Southern writer? Well, that’s also “hack-ish.”

Toward the end of our phone conversation in September, Chuck Reece opened two books and read aloud the opening line of each. The first was William Faulkner’s “Absolom, Absolom!” The second was Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

The juxtaposition of Faulkner’s “florid” prose with O’Connor’s “straightforward” writing drove home Reece’s point: “There are so many different Southern voices.”

Reece, 54, is the founder and editor of *The Bitter Southerner*, an Atlanta-based digital publication that’s trying to reimagine the South. The Ellijay, Georgia, native worked himself into a sports-writing gig for his hometown paper in high school, and he wrote for the *Red & Black*, the student newspaper at the University of Georgia. He’s written for trade publications in New York and freelanced for magazines. He covered the 1990 Georgia gubernatorial race, which led to a job as Gov. Zell Miller’s press secretary. Now, he’s back writing and editing narrative nonfiction.

And he’s struggling with the word “y’all.”

In his branding of *The Bitter Southerner*, Reece said he might overuse the South’s signature pronoun — a familiar cultural marker and one that invites stereotype. Yes, there’s an appeal to the word “y’all,” and there’s also the

assumption that all Southerners use it. Reece intends his publication to challenge assumptions.

“Some of the worst shit I get, in terms of submissions, is stuff that’s just so self-consciously Southern,” Reece said. “You know, that, like, uses shit that people *think* we say, instead of what we actually say.”

For Reece, voice is less about the words that writers use and more about their points of view. Voice is rendered by the topics they select and the thoughtful way they take a reader through a piece.

Earlier in our conversation, Reece referenced a recent New York Times review, which applauded *The Bitter Southerner* for its “off-centered” and “vivid” take on the South. If people hold that view of his publication, he said, it’s because “they’re not used to people writing about the South that way.”

Here’s what I came to understand from my conversation with Reece: No, there’s not a distinctive Southern voice. But Southern writers can make their voices distinctive — by challenging whitewashed history and mythology.

“I think in the South, maybe more than other places,” Tommy Tomlinson said, “we had to invent myths and legends of things, because the South has always been on the losing end on a lot of the history of this country.”

Tomlinson’s words echoed those of Reece, with whom he worked at the Red & Black in college. The 51-year-old Brunswick, Georgia, native has covered a litany of topics in his 29-year career, the bulk of which has been spent at the Charlotte Observer. He’s a Pulitzer finalist who’s been featured in the “Best American Sports

Writing” and “America’s Best Newspaper Writing,” and he’s a freelancer and contributing writer for ESPN.

“In some ways our imaginations had to cover up some of the harsh realities of what Southerners faced, and some of the hands they dealt themselves,” he continued.

He’d arrived at this point after talking about the South’s stereotypically strong oral storytelling tradition, after I’d asked him how the region has influenced his writing. The theme of storytelling came up in all of my interviews, and Tomlinson answered many of my questions with stories. He was the only writer of the bunch who could describe his voice to me.

Tomlinson’s parents were sharecroppers, and they had to drop out of school to work. But they learned how to read, and when the paper thudded against the family’s door around 4 p.m. each day, Tomlinson would retrieve it, take off the green rubber band that bound it, and he and his parents would read.

When he was at the Charlotte Observer, a master’s student interned one summer with the goal of figuring out what grade level the paper’s reporters wrote at. According to the student’s analysis, Tomlinson wrote at a fifth-grade level, the lowest in the newsroom. His colleagues gave him “some shit about that.” Tomlinson, though, took it as a compliment.

His writing voice, he said, is characterized by simplicity: telling complex stories in a way anyone can understand them. The ability to clearly explain nuclear fission to his mother, he said. (Pixar movies — “WALL-E,” “The Incredibles” and

“Inside Out” — are a source of inspiration. They’re made with kids in mind, but they contain great emotion, plot twists and drama.)

And, referencing a recent article he wrote for Our State magazine, his voice is characterized by intimacy. Tomlinson had to have surgery for throat cancer, which damaged his vocal cords. He’s no longer able to shout above scrums of reporters in press conferences. Instead, he relies on observation and one-on-one conversations.

As I listened to Tomlinson, I realized the characteristics of his voice — simplicity, clarity, intimacy — didn’t stem from anything distinctively Southern.

He theorizes that as the world has become more connected — through television and the Internet — that everyone is now more alike than they are different. “A fusion of influence,” he called it. Rather than the presence of a distinctive Southern voice, he said, you might see “flavors” of the South in writing.

It’s like Southern cuisine, Tomlinson said, where chefs modify traditional dishes like fried chicken and collard greens. It’s like music, he said, how if you didn’t know R.E.M. was from Athens, Georgia, you wouldn’t think it was a Southern rock band — and even if you knew the group’s roots, you probably wouldn’t pair it with Lynyrd Skynyrd.

In 2005, Pate McMichael had just finished his master’s degree at the University of Missouri, and he was packing up to go home. The night before he left, he said this to his roommates: “I’m going home, I’m going home — I want to be a Southern writer. I want to be known as a Southern writer.”

At 34 years old, McMichael and I are the same age. The Washington, Georgia, native has been a journalist for over a decade, and he teaches journalism at Georgia College, in Milledgeville. He's written for St. Louis Magazine and Atlanta Magazine, and he was a finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists in 2009. In April, he penned "Klandestine," a book about a conspiracy to cover up James Earl Ray's involvement in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

As McMichael spoke about going home to be a Southern writer, I felt a kinship over the phone on that June evening. *Finally*, I thought, *someone who's actually used that label*. But the longer we talked, the more I realized McMichael was talking about writing *in* the South, *about* the South — and about topics (such as immigration) that might upset friends and family — rather than writing *like* the South.

McMichael returned home to be "close to the land" and spend time with his father before he died. He came home armed with experience and perspective, the drive to do good journalism in a part of the world where there was a dearth of it. But he pushed back on the notion of a Southern voice.

"If you try to channel another (person's voice)," he said, "it comes out phony because, you know, you just sound like them. Voice has got to be your own voice. And I do think ... that one key to that is to pick topics that other writers don't pick, because what that does is it shows your originality"

Sitting around and trying to become the next great Southern writer "is a waste of time," he said, because it's already been done, by folks such as O'Connor and Eudora Welty.

Our conversation reminded me of an essay that John Grisham wrote in *The Oxford American* in 1992. Grisham, the Mississippi fiction writer of legal dramas, recalled sitting in a bookstore during a book-signing tour and being bothered by a TV reporter. The reporter kept asking about Faulkner, whether it was stressful for Grisham to write in the legend's shadow. Grisham reminded the reporter that he was a commercial fiction writer — and that Faulkner was dead.

So, what of this quest — what did I discover? What did I learn from my guides? My conclusion: voice is ultimately about ego and authenticity.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines ego as "the self especially as contrasted with another self or the world." For me, there's a lot of ego in a writer's voice: It's how a writer contrasts himself with other writers and the larger writing world. It's that "signature" Thompson and the barista talked about. Maybe voice is a selfish thing for a writer to consider, and maybe that's why it was hard for some of my guides to talk about it. But selfishness isn't always a bad thing.

If a journalist hopes to rise above the din of *The Media* and have his voice heard, he has to be a bit selfish — he has to find and tap into the qualities that make him distinctive and use them to flavor his writing, his stories. It's similar to a pit master making barbecue: He knows there are hundreds of ways to make 'cue, but he wants to share the meat with you in his own way. He wants you to appreciate, recognize and remember his product. And he wants you to come back for more.

So what if there's a little ego involved in the process? To me, that means a pit master — a writer — is simply trying to make the best possible product. Reporting

is one of the most selfless occupations out there: You track down sources and listen to their stories, and you realize that those stories are rarely, if ever, about you. But you have a duty to share those stories. If you don't take the time to ask yourself why and how you're sharing those stories, you risk not sharing them at all. If you're not asking yourself what makes your writing distinctive, if you're not thinking about the flavors you bring to the craft, then maybe your stories come across ... bland. Maybe folks don't try your 'cue. And then no one gets fed. A good journalist does the work so it can be shared, so readers can learn from others' stories — for social nourishment.

A little ego, an awareness of voice, doesn't have to be egotistical. But it must be authentic. Authenticity is what allows Tomlinson to take pride in the fifth-grade writing level of his work. He's a smart man. He could flavor his writing with bigger words and more complex sentences, but that's not who he is. His writing already stands out because of its simplicity. His storytelling is complex because he understands scenes and characters and plot, even if many of his readers don't. So what? Not all readers need to know how the barbecue sauce is made to enjoy the meat and benefit from the story. And some of the best stories, like some of the best barbecue, work because the sauce is simple, applied smartly and sparingly. But that's just my opinion. Some folks like a little more sauce.

At the risk of beating this barbecue analogy to death, I know that some Southerners prefer their pork pulled rather than chopped. Still, others like ribs. And in my home state of North Carolina, sauce is a divisive subject: You might appreciate and, if you're honest, enjoy Eastern North Carolina vinegar-based sauce, but the

Piedmont's ketchup-infused "dip" is what really resonates with you. If you're from South Carolina, you might like mustard sauce. Alabama? Some folks down there use a white sauce. Hell, I like it all. And just as there's not one true Southern-style barbecue, there's not one distinctive Southern writing voice.

There are, though, distinctive Southern writers. My guides are four such examples. They remind me of my favorite barbecue places in the South. They're deeply rooted in their communities. They've been around for a while. They're products of their environment, and their products incorporate those environmental flavors. Their writing voices have developed over time, like barbecue that's been cooked "low and slow." Soul food offerings with a sense of place. But their own sense of a specific place.

It's ironic and perhaps a bit cliché that I've used barbecue to explain my findings on Southern voice. Seems a very Southern thing to do. But looking back on my quest, I think it was plagued by three problems.

The first was the term *Southern*. What does it mean to be Southern, and what is the South? Pick up a book by University of North Carolina sociologist John Shelton Reed and you'll quickly learn that the South is as much a state of mind as it is a region of the country. Read Rebecca Watts' "Contemporary Southern Identity" and reflect on her argument that the label "Southerners" often refers to white folks from the South "who proudly identify themselves as such." Or have Thompson remind you — as he reminded me back in June — that his South (Mississippi) differs from your South (in my case, Appalachian North Carolina). There are many Souths — the

Deep South, the white South, the black South, the rural South, the urban South, Florida — and they're all their own things.

Equally nebulous is the concept of voice. Poynter's Roy Peter Clark writes that voice is the sum of a writer's tools used to render the effect of speaking directly to the reader — of all writing effects, “none is more important or elusive as the quality called voice.” What tools and how many? And all this stuff is elusive? Add to that that most of the folks I spoke with shied away from overt attempts to develop voice. For Thompson and McMichael, a writer's preoccupation with voice could come across gimmicky at best, pompous at worst.

The biggest problem with my quest, though, was my hope for the existence of a Southern writing voice — what I thought might be a blueprint for belonging. I have come to realize that this hope was lazy and, if I'm honest, naïve.

It's lazy in the sense that blueprints can be copied. Copying something is much easier than crafting something new. And copying something diminishes its distinctiveness. In today's media market, where everyone is his own “publisher” and everybody competes for attention, why would I want to look for a voice to copy? Yes, it's beneficial to borrow from other writers and learn from their processes, but it's counterproductive to try to sound like someone else. When you copy something, it's not your own.

It's naïve to think that one voice could even begin to characterize a region that is so diverse. It's also dangerous. The South's failings — secession and race relations, in particular — set the region apart from the rest of the country and pit its people against one another. A lot of its history is tinged with violent internal and

external disunity, meaning that many voices were silenced or drowned out. Many continue to be. So tell me, should one voice define a region that's so diverse, a region where the label "Southerner" doesn't resonate with all of its people? Even if that Southern writing voice existed, I'd have to question who it speaks to, who it speaks for and who it fails to represent.

My quest was about belonging — hoping to find Southern writers with whom I could share a Southern voice. It failed. And that's OK. I was an explorer who set out to find one thing and found another. What I found is that I needed to look inward to continue to develop and hone my writing voice. Pate McMichael told me not focus on developing a Southern voice; the South would come through naturally in my writing, he said. He's right. And the South that will come through in my writing will be my South, shaped by my personal experiences and contextualized by my understanding of them. At present, I still have much to understand.

And this is the lesson that any writer can take from my quest: Come to know yourself first before trying to emulate something else. And if you want to emulate something, ask yourself why. I was searching for belonging when I should have been seeking self-acceptance. I was trying to define myself through the South before grappling with what that might mean.

A few months ago, I asked my father, who's easing into retirement, if he planned to work on that novel. He didn't know, he said. I encouraged him to pick it back up — a good hobby in retirement, I advised. Feeling confident — overconfident — in my abilities, I offered to help him write it.

But, I said, we have to change the title. He didn't say anything. I pressed him on the matter: "A Voice in the Southern Wind" sounds too cliché, too superficial, I said. It felt like he was trying too hard to sound Southern. He could say the same to me.