

SCENE, HEARD,

LACED

AND LOVED

Trends in long form





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**O**N A SATURDAY MORNING LAST NOVEMBER, 85 writers and editors ascended the stairs of a cedar-shingled building at UC Berkeley to attend “The Latest in Longform” conference. Center stage in a bright lecture hall, ASJA member Constance Hale, dazzling in turquoise, asked *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein the question everyone awaited, “Are you purchasing long form?”

The answer, as we would learn over the day from Silverstein and fellow editors, is that some of the nation’s most prominent media are buying. Yes, hope exists for writers of fact-based storytelling that combs the labyrinth of human experience in the tradition of McPhee, Talese, Wolf, Capote and other revered writers. True, the field of well-paying markets remains limited. Still, while not every piece of long form finds a home or renders top dollar (or dollar, period), long form can be seen pulsing in print and online thanks to social media, cultural shifts and the chase for news.

“Long-form narrative nonfiction is as old as humanity,” says Judith Horstman, long-time journalist, university professor, and author of *The Scientific American* “brain” series. “Narrative gives meaning to the events of our lives. Humanizing complex subjects makes them easier to grasp – and care about.”

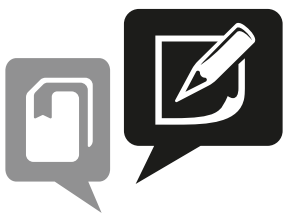
Sid Holt, chief executive officer of the American Society of Magazine Editors, reports an upward swing of elaborate (long form) pieces considered for the National Magazine Awards, especially stories published on digital platforms. “Word counts have been unbound,” he says. “One recent submission was 30,000 words long – longer, the awards judges pointed out, than *The Great Gatsby*.” Holt sees multimedia as integral to magazine storytelling. “I anticipate growing convergence between long form and multimedia,” he says.

Publisher interest is spreading in stories with depth. “Every year there seem to be more opportunities because of the backlash against brevity, a reaction to Twitter and sites like BuzzFeed that can distort our understanding of events because of size limitation,” says journalist Jessica Carew Kraft.

#### FORMAT ADVANTAGE PROMOTING LONG FORM

Digital media has reduced costs that formerly dissuaded long form. Deirdre English, director of the Clay Felker Magazine Center at UC Berkeley School of Journalism, says, “It used to be that every droplet of ink bled publishers’ money. Any length is now easily and cheaply produced. Established magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and *Mother Jones* are publishing more content online, and many new outlets are vying for content – *Pacific Standard*, *California Sunday Magazine*, *Narrative*, *Guernica*, *Salon*, *Alternet*, *Atavist*, *Shebooks*, *Medium*, *Narrative.ly*, *Byliner* and many more.”

An enduring example of how digital media brings a long form piece to life can be found in the “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” from *The New York Times* ([nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall](http://nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall)). This interactive piece immerses the reader through motion graphics, maps, testimonies, still shots, diagrams and video and audio dramatizations, offering a complete sensory experience.



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– JESSICA CAREW KRAFT

#### CRAFT

Back in Berkeley, discussion focused on how to make long form pieces more effective, including:

- Fully develop the idea behind the story, high in stakes with far-reaching significance; (One editor said that more than half of the pitches received are not stories but subjects in search of a story).
- Tell the story as “an arc, a beginning-middle-end, a spine with limbs attached in just the right places,” says Hale, conference organizer and author of *Sin and Syntax* and *Hex, Vex, Smash, Smoosh*. Use literary techniques. [sinandsyntax.com/talking-story/narrative-journalism](http://sinandsyntax.com/talking-story/narrative-journalism)
- Study screenwriting practices, activating the moment through zooming in, panning out, pacing, point-of-view and revelatory descriptions (ref. “The Innocent Man” by Pamela Colloff, *Texas Monthly*, Nov-Dec, 2012). [texasmnthly.com/story/innocent-man-part-one](http://texasmnthly.com/story/innocent-man-part-one)
- Think in chapters and write in section breaks to advance the story, activating time as a lever to increase suspense.
- Ask yourself if there are ways to deepen or amplify the story in an increasingly visual world, where phones and tablets of the reading public glow with content accessorized by graphs, charts, images and video.

Kraft summarizes the conference: “We heard over and over that a long form story is made out of captivating scene descriptions, unique characters who are fully contextualized and an overarching theme or motif that transcends any single detail. A successful long form writer is able to build authentic relationships with subjects, editors and publications.”



#### POST-CONFERENCE LONG FORM TIPS AND COMMENTS FROM ACCOMPLISHED ATTENDEES

“Asking why writers are drawn to deep storytelling is like asking actors why they’re drawn to the stage or ballplayers to the field. And writers who are drawn to narrative journalism go beyond information to seek context and connection. If only there were a surer connection between passion and pay. So writers need to ask deeper questions, find fresh story angles and be creative about where they pitch.”

—**Jacqui Banaszynski**, *Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Missouri School of Journalism Professor*

“Tell me a damn good story. The best long form essays, the ones I want to read and publish, take the reader on a dynamic journey, with turns in the road that cannot be seen at the start, but which prove both surprising and inevitable. Get at the roots. The thinking is clear, the heart engaged. I like to say to writers: Write to save your life. Revise to give a gift to the reader. That gift may be insight, entertainment, illumination—better still, let it be all three. The pact between writer and reader is one of trust and generosity.”

—**Carol Edgarian**, *cofounder and publisher of Narrative Magazine*

“Capturing a reader’s attention requires creativity in the deluge of bits and pixels. Writers fare well if they have a voice and a mission, know their audience, have supporters who give good feedback, and can master the new technology skills involved. Aggregators like *Longform.com* are helping intelligent readers to find the best of the lot, and social media like Twitter and Facebook help an author to seek their ideal audience.”

—**Deirdre English**, *director, Clay Felker Magazine Center*

“The number one way to improve your craft is to devour long form narrative, re-reading the stories that stick with you most, circling or copying the parts that resonate. As for making inroads, the only way is swallow fear and pitch.”

—**JoBeth McDaniel**, *writer*

“I am impressed by the determination shown by writers. In a public talk after the conference, essayist Adam Gopnik (*The New Yorker*) said it took him six years of regularly sending in material to finally get published there. An editor said it took one writer 15 pitches before landing an assignment. The conference gave testament to the persistence of writers, determined to continue to do their best work, despite recent hand-wringing about the industry and the challenges of making narrative journalism pay.”

—**Constance Hale**, *conference coordinator, narrative journalism instructor, and author of Sin and Syntax and Hex, Vex, Smash, Smoosh*

“Writers are expanding into multiple genres in order to get their work out. Take Andrew Lam, editor at New America Media, a journalist, a short story writer and a poet. Kate Gale, editor at Red Hen Press, just came out with a nonfiction book and a new poem collection. I’ve been a journalist for *La Oferta* for years while writing fiction, poetry and essays. Writers today cast a bigger net.”

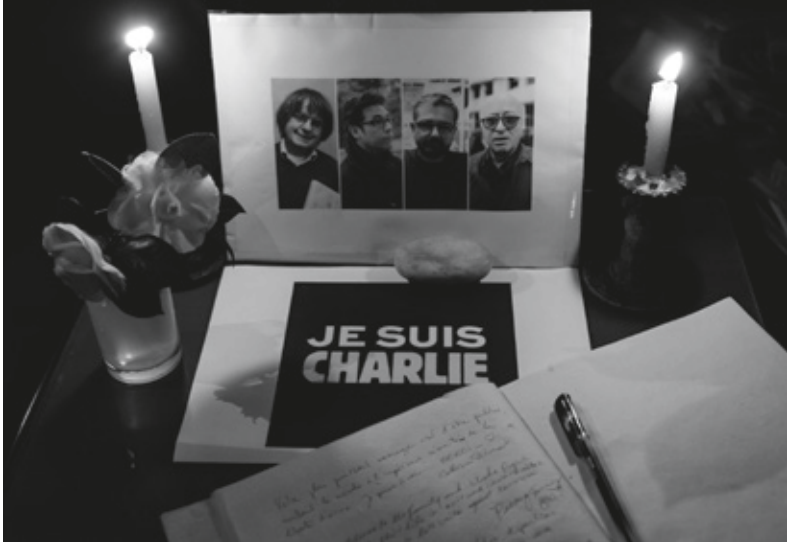
—**Sharon McElhone**, *writer/editor*

“Great stories can be found around the corner. In order to find them, writers have to pay special attention to the areas and topics of most importance where they live. Learning as much about that as possible, becoming the experts in those topics, will help them find the unexpected stories with long-form potential.”

—**Sam Quinones**, *narrative nonfiction book author*

# ASJA Supports French Colleagues

## #JeSuisCharlie



In light of the January 2015 attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, the American Society of Journalists and Authors stands in union with journalists and media organizations around the world that support a free press.

We are appalled and angered by the attack on Charlie Hebdo. We mourn for the talented lives that were lost and for the families of the victims who were shot in this senseless display of inhumanity.

Journalists are on the front lines every day in the ongoing battle against those who want to usurp our freedoms and corrupt young minds. Like all journalists, our members work tirelessly in an effort to deliver truthful, honest news stories that depict the world's struggles against those who are intent on causing harm.

The attack in Paris adds 12 more victims in an ongoing struggle to report truth. In 2014, 61 journalists were killed across the world and 27 of those were murdered, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

We are saddened and, in honor of those lives that have been lost, promise to continue fighting this ongoing battle for free speech.

Photo: Thomas Dutour, Dreamstime.com