

Sample Student 1

December 1, 2012

English 100

Research Essay

### One Unique Writing Style

*The New Kings of Nonfiction*, edited and introduced by Ira Glass, features the intriguing essay “The American Man, Age Ten” by Susan Orlean. In this story, Orlean profiles the life and imagination of a ten-year-old boy named Colin Duffy after spending two weeks with him. She begins with a bright introduction that illustrates Colin’s ten-year-old world by speaking like a ten-year-old herself. She offers general information about the boy (i.e. where he lives, who he lives with, where he goes to school, what he looks like) and then gradually and playfully starts to share his thoughts and feelings. Orlean includes descriptions of moments that they share together and different statistics that relate to Colin’s “stereo-typical boy” life. Orlean is able to address the power of imagination and the concept of pure childhood while telling the story of Colin Duffy. Her writing does not easily compare to others because her unique genre is not classified into one style. Nonetheless, Orlean uses child-like language, a straightforward reporting approach, her own good sense of humor, and intentional details to successfully communicate her ideas pretty well, differentiating her from other writers who approach the same subjects as she but not nearly as successfully.

The first and most poignant strategy that Orlean exhibits is her use of humor and informal language which initially attracts the reader and allows her to carry us through her narrative. In the introduction of the story, Orlean plays pretend and invites her

audience into the world that she discovers by saying, “We would both be good at football, have best friends, and know how to drive; we would cure AIDS and the garbage problem and everything that hurts animals” (145). This child-like approach to writing the beginning of her story creates the reader’s ability to know what spending two weeks with a ten-year-old was like. Right off the bat, Orlean connects with her audience by guiding them to revisit the innocent feeling of childhood. The editor of *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, Ira Glass, says “I love the overall tone she invents to write this story. It’s a voice that’s halfway between hers and his” (9). Many other writers take advantage of the same strategy of using kid friendly language, like children’s author Carl Hiaasen in his book *Hoot*. *Hoot* tells the story of a curious young boy who sets himself off on an adventure. Hiaasen intends for his audiences to be of young ages, therefore he uses simple language like: “Roy pedaled faster. He didn’t turn around. The clouds were darkening, and he thought he felt a raindrop on one cheek. From a distance came a rumble of thunder” (67). When he uses this way of speaking, he enables an easier read for his intended audience which is exactly what Orlean takes and then manipulates to her advantage.

It appears that she is not writing for kids, but for adults, since her language later in her story elevates. For example, using terms like “anxiety of deprivation” (Orlean 156) or “reconstructed notions” (154) shows that Orlean intends for an adult audience. So then why does she use simple language and similes like: “Each one comes as a fresh, hard surprise, like finding a razor blade in a candy apple” (149)? When Hiaasen uses similes like “Dana’s breath smelled like stale cigarettes” (Hiaasen 3), he is simply telling his story in an enjoyable way. Orlean similarly utilizes the technique of simple language to

tell her story of Colin Daffy in a relatable and playful way, but also uniquely uses it to reconnect the reader with the feeling of childhood ways. It creates an environment or perspective for the reader and in turn gives Orlean effortless control and ability to effectively communicate her concepts.

Another technique that Orlean uses in her writing that is similar to other authors is her descriptive and straightforward approach when she reports her observations of Colin. She shares this with us:

Colin's bedroom is decorated simply. He has a cage with his pet parakeet, Dude, on his dresser, a lot of recently worn clothing piled haphazardly on the floor, and a husky brown teddy bear sitting upright in a chair near the foot of his bed. The walls are mostly bare, except for a Spiderman poster and a few ads torn out of magazines he has thumb tacked up. (155)

When Orlean goes into profile mode, she is serious and emphasizes her observations to give a complete vision of what Colin's life is like. She decides to share her observations of interesting things to keep the reader engaged. This decision enables for an intriguing piece, and is what sets Orlean into her own style or genre of writing.

When taking a look at other profiles of people, or biographies, authors like Terri Dougherty also must use a straight forward approach to delivering their writing. Dougherty writes biographies of famous people, and in her biography *Beyonce*, she writes, "At an early age, Beyonce Knowles showed a talent for singing and an interest in performing. While she was a shy girl at school, a different side of her personality emerged onstage. Her talent was first noticed in an after-school dance class and burst fourth in public at a talent show" (11). Dougherty is simply striving to deliver facts about

Beyonce's life, but Orlean, while still succeeding in stating the facts about Colin's life, uses descriptive language to tell a much more intriguing story. Orlean's ability to describe the boy's life in a fun and interesting way allows the reader to relate to and care more about the subject. She chooses to not simply state facts about the boy's life but to create a full, tangible world that her readers can follow her into. Orlean's strategy to deliver her observations in a report-like manner resembles the way an author like Dougherty would write about her subjects. Orlean does this to achieve a profile of her subject, but she puts her own twist on detailing the writing to make it her own style of profiling.

Orlean also uses humor quite effectively throughout her essay to add her own personal touch and to provide for a more enjoyable read as she unravels her tale. In her introduction, not only does she use child-like language, but her humor intriguingly invites her audience to discover "what it means to be ten" (Glass 9). She writes, "We wouldn't have sex, but we would have crushes on each other, and, magically, babies would appear in our home" (145). Everyone was once a ten year old, and Orlean is playing with the naïve imagination that exists at that age to seduce and connect with her audience. Many other authors use humor in their writing too, of course. Suzy Becker, for example, in *I Had Brain Surgery, What's Your Excuse?* uses loads of funny statements and a witty tone to carry her readers through her dense memoir. She shares, "I was twenty-five minutes late for my Tuesday therapist appointment. 'I got lost,' I said before I sat down, one of those excuses that was so hard to believe, it had to be true" (177). When we read through this memoir, we learn about Becker's terrifying experiences of overcoming a medical condition. Becker successfully lightens up her writing as much as possible to let her

readers in and to follow her as she reveals her journey, much like Orlean. Orlean utilizes her sense of humor to entertain her readers and to successfully help her achieve the feeling of childhood. When she says that Colin “plans to go to college, to a place he says is called Oklahoma City State College University. OCSCU satisfies his desire to live out west,” (Orlean 146) she is parading his naiveté. She and her audience know that this school does not exist, so she is being funny and toying with reality, much like a ten-year-old would, by abbreviating the school name. This creativity and ability to play pretend successfully reminds her audience of what it’s like to have an innocent ten-year-old imagination, which is quite a ingenious way of helping to get us inside the head of Colin – which is entirely necessary for the success of her piece.

Another strategy that effectively allows Orlean to address her ideas is structuring her writing to include specific details that help her portray the feeling of childhood. At the very end of her piece she states, “This will happen so fast that one night he will be in the backyard, believing it a perfect place, and by the next night he will have changed and the yard as he imagined it will be gone, and this era of his life will be behind him forever” (158). Out of the many things to say or include at the end of her writing from all the notes she accumulates over the duration of spending two weeks with Colin, she shares this idea of his backyard. It is a unique strategy that captures an adult perspective of a loss of childhood feelings.

Other authors similarly structure their writing to achieve a specific message. In *The Story of My Body*, Judith Ortiz Cofer structures her personal essay into four subdivided sections that she uses to progressively build a coherent narrative and build a picture of the person – herself – she chronicles in her piece. As she discusses her story

and how each aspect of skin, color, size, and looks have been judged by different cultures, she ultimately reveals where she believes one must find true self-worth by concluding, “My studies, later my writing, the respect of people who saw me as an individual person they cared about, these were the criteria for my sense of self-worth that I would concentrate on in my adult life” (545). The decision to include each section plays a part of the underlying meaning of what Cofer believes really matters when evaluating oneself. This strategy successfully works for Cofer in delivering that message, and it also works for Orlean. One day she “[is] quizzing Colin about his world-views,” and when she asks him “What’s the most important thing in the world?”, his response is, “‘Game Boy.’ Pause. ‘No, the world. The world is the most important thing in the world’” (150). Here she strategically shares a moment that reflects how “ten-year-olds feel the weight of the world and consider it their mission to shoulder it” (148) which again emphasizes a naïve perspective. Even though Orlean does not clearly break her essay down into parts, she pieces together her observations and intentionally includes stories that effectively exemplify and capture the feeling of Colin’s ten-year-old perspective.

Deploying useful writing strategies like using simpler, non-academic language, taking a reporter’s approach to chronicling events, and suffusing the narrative with sly humor and innocent ironies allow Orlean the ability to create and guide her audience into an innocent child-like world while telling the story of Colin Duffy. Similarly to Hiaasen, she offers an easy read by using simple language, and that first opens the doors for her readers to the imaginative world she observes. She shares the technique of reporting details to even further describe her observations, the way an author like Dougherty would strictly list facts. Orlean takes opportunities to add her humor into her writing, like

Becker, to keep her readers entertained. She also strategically structures her essay, similar to the way Cofer thinks about how to put together her essay, by including stories and comments that again emphasize the childhood feelings she successfully evokes. Overall, Orlean very effectively uses these writing techniques to convey her ideas, all the while still setting her writing apart in her own unique way.

## Annotated Works Cited

Becker, Suzy. *I Had Brain Surgery, What's Your Excuse?*. New York, NY: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2004. Print.

This memoir is filled with humor. Becker uses an uplifting tone to share with her readers her experiences of coping with an awful medical condition. She includes over 400 illustrations and charts that make her piece truly original.

Cofer, Judith. "The Story of My Body." *Rereading America Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. Ed. Colombo, Gary, Ed. Cullen, Robert and Ed. Lisle, Bonnie. 8th Ed. Boston, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. 537-545. Print.

Cofer reflects how different societies have judged her appearance in this personal essay. She uses subdivided sections to structure her piece in a way that effectively conveys her messages. She addresses her ideas on gender and cultural perceptions while telling her story.

Dougherty, Terri. *Beyonce*. Farmington Hills: Lucent Books, 2007. Print.

This book is just one of the series of biographies that Dougherty has written for children. The book takes an in-depth look into the life and career of Beyonce Knowles. It includes Beyonce's upbringing and her journey to becoming famous. The book also includes a multitude of Beyonce's accomplishments and works that lead her to reaching her dreams and become a world-renown figure.

Glass, Ira, Ed. *The New Kings of Nonfiction*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2007. Print.

Glass compiles different works of journalism into this text. He admires each one for reasons he specifies, and wants to share them with the world. Overall, the work he shares are from authors who are all testing the norm and developing new

and different styles of writing.

Hiaasen, Carl. *Hoot*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2002. Print.

This book is specifically written for children ages ten and up, so it is written in a child friendly manner. In the book, Carl Hiaason illustrates a fictitious story of a young boy named Roy who moves to Florida with his family. The story initially begins with Roy setting out to learn more about a mysterious boy in town, but in turn discovering things he never knew he would.

Orlean, Susan. "The American Man, Age Ten." *The New Kings of Nonfiction*. Ed. Glass, Ira. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2007. 144-159. Print.

Susan Orlean profiles a ten-year-old named Colin Duffy in this essay. She uses many different techniques, some of which are humor and child-like language. She successfully imagines what it is like to be ten.