Alice Trillin

A WRITER'S PROCESS: A CONVERSATION WITH CALVIN TRILLIN

One night at dinner about ten years ago Mina Shaughnessy asked my husband to tell her how he wrote. I am sure that in the fifteen or so years that he had been a professional writer a number of people had asked him the same thing, but there was something about being asked a question by Mina that made you think particularly hard about the answer. One reason for this was that you knew that she was really interested in what you would say. Also, you knew that she wanted the *real* answer to the question. If she asked a writer how he wrote, she did not want to know how many cigarettes he smoked before he started or whether he used a manual or an electric or how much money he made. She really wanted to know how the writer wrote. So, for the first time in those fifteen years, my husband began to think seriously about how he began to approach a story, what the difference between a first and second draft was, how he knew when he had finished something, and what the difference between writing fiction and non-fiction was. He did not give Mina the whole answer to her question that evening, nor did he give it to me in the interview that follows, but what he says here is, I think, informed by more conversations over the past ten years than most writers would be willing to subject themselves to, with Mina and with me, about the process of writing.

In the questions I asked Calvin Trillin I did not confine myself to the part of the writing process that is most commonly thought of as revision- the multiple drafts that follow the first attempt to get words on

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DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1981.3.3.02

paper. Instead, I asked about each "stage" of his writing process, because I think we know now that the various sub-processes are not discrete. Revision goes on during each moment of the writing process, in the sense that to revise means to "see again." The writer constantly looks and then looks again, as Ann Berthoff has told us, constantly making different choices and making and re-making connections, constantly forming and re-forming.

There are no rules that govern the way we write. It will be clear from the interview that follows that even after twenty-five years of professional writing, Trillin's "process" varies every time he sits down at the typewriter. But the one thing that never varies, it seems to me as someone who has observed him, is his willingness always to look again, whether it is at the people and situations he is writing about, the structure of a story or a paragraph or a sentence, or the appropriateness of a word. It is by learning to look and look again—by constantly revising the way we see and understand as well as the way we arrange words on paper- -that we begin to become writers.

Alice: Let's begin by talking about how you approach a "U.S. Journal" story for *The New Yorker* once you arrive in the city you are going to write about.

Calvin: First I have to have some idea, even if it's a vague one, of what interests me about the situation before I get there. I'm probably better off if the idea *is* vague because I don't want to have too many preconceptions about what the story is: after all, the story I have in mind before I arrive may not actually work out to be a story.

Alice: How often do your ideas for stories change?

Calvin: They change fairly often. Sometimes the entire subject changes, but more often the approach to it changes. For example, I went to Tampa to do a story that I thought was going to be about how three different mens' luncheon clubs dealt with the question of whether or not women should be admitted to membership or at least be allowed to have lunch there or to have some sort of in-between privileges.[1] Each club handled the situation differently. As I started researching, I discovered that one of

[1] "Four People Who Do Not Lunch at the University Club," *The New Yorker*, April 11, 1977.

the luncheon clubs was much more influential than the other two so that I really couldn't write about the three of them in the same way. The other thing was that this approach was fairly boring. But I discovered four interesting women who were involved with the situation in one way or another. One of them had been a state senator who had been kicked out of one of the luncheon clubs during lunch; one was a television newswoman; one was a member of one of the clubs that had changed its policy; and one was a local feminist leader who liked to make fun of the most important club. So instead of the story being "Three Luncheon Clubs in Tampa," it was "Four People Who Do Not Lunch at the University Club." In a way, it was the same subject but a different approach.

Alice: What do you do if you get someplace and find out the story isn't there at all?

Calvin: Well, I recently did a story in Utah that was unusual because I changed the subject after I got home.[2] I went out originally to do a story on a kind of maverick, self-taught scientist who was having trouble with a town in Utah where he was conducting experiments that he said would end the energy crisis. Many people in the town said that he was just a crank. I found the argument between him and the town kind of predictable and not very interesting. Because stories usually depend a lot on their context, I usually gather a lot of material about the towns I'm in. As it turned out in this case, the town and the way it allotted and used space were terribly interesting. There seemed to be hundreds of miles of empty space all around the town, but actually space was at a premium in the town. A lot of this had to do with gambling just over the state line. As a result, I didn't use very much of what I had researched about the scientist, but instead I used a lot about the context. So it ended up to be a story about space in Wendover, Utah.

Alice: That's interesting to me because I think it was your least successful story this year. Is that because you hadn't done the right research?

Calvin: Right. Even though I had gathered a lot of material about the town because it was what interested me most, I really hadn't done it in as

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[2] "Space in Wendover," *The New Yorker*, April 13, 1981.

systematic a way as I would have if I had actually started out reporting on the town or had changed my mind while I was out there. As a result, I had to do a lot of reporting by phone from New York, and still I was never, in the end, satisfied with the piece because I really didn't have enough information to write confidently about the town. The more you know about a situation, the more small details and knowledge you have beyond what you seem to need, the better you can write about it.

Alice: To what extent is the research—the details—important in the finished story? It seems to me that sometimes a great deal of the reporting shows up in the story, and sometimes the story ends up being much more something that bounces off the reporting.

Calvin: That difference depends on the tone of the story and the type of story it is. If the story is a murder story,[3] for example, that has within it its own narrative line—its own beginning, middle, and end, and its own details—then what I try to do when I write is get out of the way and just let the story tell itself. I try to get as many of the details as cleanly as possible into the story and try to get all the marks of writing off of the story. Sometimes I think of it as trying to change clothes in a tiny closet.

But if it's a story about the search for barbecued mutton in western Kentucky,[4] for instance, which is really just based on my notions of eating thrown together with some experiences—there's no beginning, middle or end—something different than gathering as many facts as possible is called for.

And then, as I said before, sometimes a story changes along the way, causing the balance between straight reporting and my personal reactions to the reporting to change with it. But usually, except in extreme cases, like western Kentucky's barbecued mutton, it's not easy to tell how a story will turn out when I begin to write. So I still have to do all of the reporting and gather as many facts as I can.

Alice: In other words, sometimes the story ends up being more based on the information and sometimes more based on your reaction to the information.

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[3]See, for example, "Harvey St. Jean Had It Made," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1975, and "It's Just Too Late," *The New Yorker*, March 12, 1979.

[4]"Stalking the Barbecued Mutton," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 7, 1977.

Calvin: Yes. This has a lot to do with whether I'm going to use a subject to tell jokes and to talk about my impressions of the subject or if I'm going to tell a story. Obviously, this division isn't always clear. The story I did this year on the undercover operation among poachers in the riverbottom in Illinois was, in a way, an ordinary story based on facts gathered in a lot of interviews, newspaper clippings, and that sort of reporting.[5] On the other hand, the story was meant to be rather humorous because the situation was humorous.

Alice: It seems to me that you most often use humor to become personal. But sometimes, very rarely, as in your story about Atlanta,[6] you do a much more serious kind of analysis based on your reaction to events, not just on your reporting, that achieves a personal effect in a different way.

Calvin: That's right. There are only three or four cities in the United States that I have enough of a feel for and enough of a long-term knowledge of to write about in a way that's more analytical. One of them is Kansas City, where I grew up; another is New Orleans. The Atlanta piece that you mentioned before is about Atlanta in the early sixties—a time when I lived there or visited there often. I felt that I knew enough about that city to analyze it in a confident way, in what some people call the casual essay; there is a point at which what the writer knows goes beyond mere "information." There is a feeling I have with some subjects that I've gone beyond fact-gathering and interviewing and am really qualified to make analyses—I know them well enough to casually—and I think that's where the casual essay comes in—use an example.

Alice: What do you usually end up with, then, after you finish reporting and are ready to start writing, and what do you do with it?

Calvin: What I have when I get home is a notebook full of handwritten notes, and sometimes if I've been conscientious, some notes which I've typed up either late at night or early in the morning as a way of sharpening my notes a bit. As I type out notes, I remember things that were said or fill out sentences that aren't really carefully done. Also, I find out what I don't know—that there are questions that I will have to ask the next day. In addition to that, I usually have a lot of Xeroxes of newspaper

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[5] "Quackscam." *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1981

[6] "Rembrance of Moderates Past." *The New Yorker*, March 21, 1977.

clippings, and sometimes I even have copies of court transcripts, brochures, etc. Whatever I have, it is often a fairly sizeable pile. Then, the day after I get home, I do a kind of pre-draft—what I call a "vomit-out." I don't even look at my notes to write it. It says, for example, U.S. Journal, Chicago, followed by the title, and starts out, at least, in the form of a story. But it degenerates fairly quickly, and by page four or five sometimes the sentences aren't complete. I write almost the length of the story in this way. The whole operation takes no more than an hour at the typewriter, but it sometimes takes me all day to do it because I'm tired and I've put it off a bit. Sometimes I don't even look at the vomit-out for the rest of the week and I have an absolute terror of anybody seeing it. It's a very embarrassing document. I tear it up at the end of the week.

I don't write a pre-draft for fiction or for humor, but I can't seem to do without one for non-fiction. I've tried to figure out why I need it, what purpose it serves. I think it gives me an inventory of what I want to say and an opportunity to see which way the tone of the story is going to go, which is very important. Also, this is about the time that I begin to see technical problems that will come up—for example, that one part of the story doesn't lead into the next, or that I should write the story in the first person, or start it in a different way. And obviously, the most important and difficult parts of writing a piece of nonfiction are building the structure and setting the tone and point of view. In any case, almost always, I think, the first paragraph of the pre-draft has something to do with the story that I end up with.

Alice: In other words, the lead in the vomit-out is often the lead you use in the final draft.

Calvin: Probably the lead in the vomit-out has something to do with the lead in the last draft much of the time—even if the original language has been changed to the point of being unrecognizable.

A lead in one of my stories is not necessarily the most important sentence in the story in the sense that a newspaper lead has to contain the most important development in the article. But it is important as a way to get into the story, to establish the tone and direction.

Alice: Let's talk about that for a minute. You were saying the other day that John McPhee never starts a story at the beginning—the chronological beginning—as far as we know.[7] I think that's a very interesting notion.

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[7] *See introduction to The John McPhee Reader*, ed. by William Howarth, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

How do you decide where to start and what does that have to do with where you go?

Calvin: Well, I meant that as a compliment, as a description of why his stories engage you right away. All of a sudden you're swimming in this story and you find it interesting—you're not quite sure why—and then some details appear to bolster you and provide a kind of craft for going down this river that he's created for you. You gradually find out why you're there. It's not as if he says, "Here is a river and here is a boat"—which is usually a far less interesting way to start.

Recently, for instance, I wrote a story on the discovery of the Tunica treasure[8] which I couldn't start by saying, "Here is a man who works as a prison guard in Angola State Prison, and on his weekends he sometimes looks for buried treasure that is rumored to be around the Indian village." Because the real point of the story centered around the problems caused when an amateur wanders on to professional territory, I thought it would be much better to open with how momentous this discovery was, that it was the most important archeological discovery about Indian contact with the European settlers to date, and *then* to say that it was discovered by a prison guard. So I made a conscious choice *not* to start with Leonard Charrier working as a prison guard, not to go back to his boyhood in Bunkie, Louisiana, not to talk about how he'd always been interested in treasure hunting, hoping that the reader would assume that I was about to say that the treasure was found by an archeologist from the Peabody Museum at Harvard.

Alice: And the lead determined what the story was about because it didn't center on the prison guard finding the treasure, but on the relationship of all the other people in the story to the treasure.

Calvin: That's right. It was a treasure to different people for different reasons—scholars, Indians, fortune hunters, and so on.

Alice: Let's get on to the second draft. McPhee talks about structure in a story in an almost physical way—sorting out his notes, sorting out his folders. What happens when you write your second draft?

Calvin: Well, as I said before, I write the pre-draft without looking at my

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[8]"The Tunica Treasure," *The New Yorker*, July 27, 1981.

notes as a way of finding out what I think, what is really important to me about what I've been looking at for four or five days, often rather intensively. Sometimes—when I am very lucky—the story just opens up before me and I realize which direction to go in. If things are going well, there are times when I think, "Well, now I understand this," but then the next day I think, "How could I have ever thought that? Now I really understand what's going on here." And I don't mean necessarily that I just found more facts; it's a matter of understanding them differently. Then I go back and look at all my notes and documents. I have to say that sometimes I'm impatient about reading through all the documents very carefully at that point, particularly if I have a pretty good notion of which way the story is going, and I might put some of that reading off a bit for the next day. I try to go through everything, though, making a list on a legal pad of points or quotes that I'm sure I want to include.

Alice: Not in any particular order?

Calvin: No. As I come to them. So I have the list, and I have the lead that has usually survived from the pre-draft, or if not, I try to figure out another lead. And then the second day, I begin the rough draft. I do that in a very pedestrian way. I pretend that the piece will be twelve pages long: actually it is more likely to be fourteen or fifteen. Because the beginning is a little harder to write than the second part, I write six pages—half of the rough draft—on this day. When I say that I *write* six pages I might in fact have eighty pages in the wastebasket, since I don't do much pencil editing. I work mainly on the typewriter. If the first half of the page satisfies me and I don't seem to be doing very well on the second half, I might just rip off that second half and staple on the first half to the top of a clean paper and start again. Sometimes I literally rip pages apart and staple them together in sections when I see that something belongs in a different place. At the end of the second day, I have six pages that read like a manuscript. There aren't many errors. Also, I don't think of the pages of the rough draft as "finished" unless they are typed properly.

Obviously, a writer's process is very personal. There is no formula that works for all people. I know people who work completely with pencils, drawing arrows to indicate that something belongs somewhere else. And I also know people who write in finished paragraphs. But I simply never would get past the first paragraph of a non-fiction piece if I tried to work that way. Part of the way I write has to do with the fact that I touch-type very quickly, the result of having taken typing when I was a kid.

Alice: So at the end of the second day you have six pages of the first draft. At the end of the third day you have a complete rough draft. What kinds of things happen at that point? For example, do you start fine-tuning sentences or are you still playing with the structure? And why, at a certain point, do you have me read your rough drafts?

Calvin: There have been times when the structure and tone changed a lot after the rough draft—but more often the basic structure and tone are decided and it is beginning to look like a piece.

Alice: Not a terribly well-written piece, but a piece.

Calvin: Some of the language is exactly what I'm going to end up with and some isn't. But then "rough" literally means rough; there are sentences that I could write better. At this point I really need a reader other than myself—someone to see whether I've said what I wanted to say, someone who can see that it might be said better. This is when I ask you to read it. I need someone to say, "I don't understand what you're getting at here," or "This part is very boring," or "I don't think this is really what you mean," or "I don't understand the relationship of this to this." I need to know that what I've written is basically all right before I go on to the next step—which is what I call the "yellow draft." Usually the yellow draft is my favorite part. Incidentally, I use yellow paper at this stage to distinguish this draft from the rough draft, which is done on regular white paper, as opposed to the vomit-out, which is also done on yellow paper, as a way to keep things in order on my desk.

Alice: There have been a few occasions when I've read a rough draft that just hasn't worked. It seems to me that most writers at this point would just divorce their wives, but you don't.

Calvin: Most writers probably wouldn't put the burden of reading it on their wives.

Alice: If it doesn't work by the end of the rough draft, you figure out what's wrong and start again.

Calvin: Yes. This may mean changing the structure or the tone, or starting at a different place, or getting into the story in a different way. It may mean really ripping the piece up and maybe inserting new paragraphs into

what I'm changing. Although I have made these kinds of major changes on the yellow draft, what I really like to do at this stage is write the piece better.

Alice: This is when you're playing with sentences instead of the piece as a whole.

Calvin: Right. I really look forward to writing the yellow draft, partly because it means that I've gotten to the end of the piece one time. That is very important to me. Once I've actually seen the piece started and finished, I can go on to figure out how to improve each sentence, which is fun because I'm just kind of playing with them. I start at the beginning and write the whole thing again. That's one day's work.

Alice: What kind of play goes on? In other words, what are you doing to those sentences? Are you making them more beautiful, or clearer, or a little of both?

Calvin: Often I'm making them clearer. But I'm also looking at how well the paragraphs fit together. For instance, I might find something in the middle of the story that I realize is the way to end it. And then I have to figure out how to put that part at the end and then get the rest of the story around it.

Alice: Then transitions become very important, when you find things don't connect well.

Calvin: Yes. Sometimes I do sharpen up transitions in the yellow draft. Obviously, transitions are difficult parts of writing. In reporting they are not only difficult but are terrible traps and temptations because it's often so difficult to get from one paragraph to the next. There's a temptation to bend things a bit, to make connections that aren't really there, in order to reach for the next paragraph. I think a lot of the inaccuracies in magazine pieces are in the transitions.

Alice: You also make a lot of changes when you type the piece.

Calvin: Usually I just change words here and there, but sometimes I do change whole ideas. In one piece I recently did, the whole ending changed as I typed it up.

Alice: Earlier you spoke about the importance of having a second reader read your work in draft form. Let's talk now about editing. I know you think it's a very valuable process at the *New Yorker.* What's good about it? What should an editor be and what can an editor do?

Calvin: An editor should be someone who is trying to help the writer say what he wants to say.

Alice: Should the editor make suggestions about what you should say?

Calvin: Editing is somewhat akin to previewing a play before it actually gets to opening night. The editor is, among other things, an intelligent reader who can see—who should be able to see—places where you didn't say what you intended to say or where what you've said isn't clear or is contradictory. For instance, anybody writing makes connections in his mind that don't come out on the paper. It often happens that you think you said something simply because you thought about it a lot.

Alice: That's called writer-based prose.

Calvin: Whatever it's called, it happens often. You think that you've said something you haven't actually said because you've said it in your mind rather than on paper. You've thought about it a lot, and in fact, in one draft you may have said it on paper. But ultimately in the final draft the connections aren't there. And then sometimes writers include details that are unnecessary. They often get interested enough in a subject to make distinctions that aren't really of interest to anybody who doesn't know the subject as well as they do. Or, sometimes, a sentence simply is awkward. Good editors can sometimes take words out of a sentence.

Alice: Should an editor ever put words into a story?

Calvin: I don't think an editor should put words into a story without consulting the writer. Of course, this depends on whether the writer is any good. Even in national magazines, editors are often working with writers who aren't terribly good– writers who may know a lot about their subject but who haven't written about it very felicitously, or who have written more than could possibly fit, or who have gone on about some private notions that aren't very interesting. It's not as if writers are perfect beings who are sniped at by rude and insensitive editors. The editor has a job to

do; his constituency, the person he's worried about, is the reader of the magazine. So he has to protect the reader.

Alice: Could you say more about the limits of what an editor can do?

Calvin: Sometimes an editor ends up writing a lot of a story: the magazine is going to press and the story is so badly written that it turns out that the editor has to replace whole paragraphs on his own; he can't find the writer, or if he finds him the writer says it's impossible to change anything. The best an editor can do is to bring the story up to adequate, or smooth, or some word like that. That is because, almost invariably, good writing is specific writing. It uses details and examples to make subtle distinctions that the editor can't make because he doesn't know the subject.

Alice: So that brings us back to where we started. Even editing has to be based, in some way, on knowing the context and knowing as many details as you can.

Calvin: Yes. And sometimes the editor really *can't* have much knowledge of a subject. If, for example, an editor gets a terribly written story which is an eyewitness account of what goes on, say, in whaling in the North Atlantic, which has a lot of interesting facts in it, you can't really expect him to know about whaling in the sense of having experienced it. He might be able to look up a few books or something like that, but he can't write the sort of vivid eyewitness account that a person who was there can write.

If a non-fiction magazine piece is any good, the person who wrote it knows more than is on the page. I don't mean that he's holding anything back but that in order to write what he wrote he has to know more than just that one example he used. Sometimes I read stories written about something I know about and I think, "That guy has only one example for each thing he's trying to show. He's used it all." And, as it turns out, he may have had the wrong example so he made the wrong judgments. If the reporting is only one anecdote deep, then it usually isn't a very good story. And the editor simply has no way of knowing those other things. That's why I can write differently about New York, or New Orleans, or Kansas City, or Atlanta; I'm more than one anecdote deep in any subject there. I know that if I say somebody said something in the French Quarter, I've talked to three hundred people in the French Quarter over the years and I know that his remark is typical. I know the context.

Alice: So far, we've been talking only about *New Yorker* pieces. Your *Nation* columns are basically humorous. You write those differently. Could you describe that difference?

Calvin: I'm not sure why, but when I write the *Nation* columns and when I've written novels, I skip the first step—the vomit-out—and anyone could find what I've written as a first draft and read it without humiliating me. Maybe the reason I can skip that step is that I don't have to figure out how I'm going to get all the facts into the piece. In the *Nation* columns, for instance, what I begin to write might lead me somewhere else, somewhere I hadn't expected to go, and that's O.K.

In a non-fiction piece, though, you really have to carry around a lot of baggage. You have what happened, your understanding of what happened, what you want to get across about what happened, all kinds of burdens of being fair to whatever sides there are. The facts are terribly restricting. If you don't pay attention to them, there's no reason to write the story at all. The whole point of reporting is that the facts are messy—they never fit in perfectly for the transition. When the "new journalism" made it fashionable to say the fit of the facts didn't make any difference, it was like saying the net didn't make any difference in tennis. There's really no other reason to do non-fiction except to tell what happened as you understand it.

Alice: So your *Nation* columns are your "new journalism" because you get to make everything up.

Calvin: That's right. But getting back to your earlier question about the differences in how I compose pieces that aren't mainly factual, when I write a paragraph of a *Nation* column, I like to pretty much finish it before starting the next one. I still have to do two or three drafts of *Nation* columns, but it's hard for me to explain the difference between the drafts; it's a much less rigid system than that of writing non-fiction. Sometimes it only takes two drafts; sometimes it takes five.

Alice: Russell Baker often gets into his columns by writing the lead over and over again. Once that's right, the whole column grows.

Calvin: That sometimes happens. But then I also find, writing *Nation* columns for instance, that how I end the first paragraph will lead me to the next paragraph or to a whole different thought, and there's no reason

not to go there. I'm not restricted by reality, by fairness, by all sorts of constraints that are present in non-fiction. So if the column goes in a completely different direction than what I expected, it doesn't make any difference. Perhaps the next week I'll write another column in the first direction. So it's a completely different process. As it happens, in the novels I've written, I haven't started with any idea of what the end would be. I don't mean to suggest that this sort of open-ended composing is a perfect system: I have trouble tying up the loose ends. But I let the characters go where they're going to go, a privilege you don't really have with non-fiction because the purpose for writing is different. If you make things up or let your story go where it wants to or change the facts, then you just aren't writing non-fiction anymore.