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Junger: No, I'm not going to be doing that any more. Tim got killed in Libya last April, and I just decided that was a good warning sign. It felt like I'd lost my first hand at the poker game and it was time to leave. I never would have had this reaction twenty years ago. I just turned fifty. I thought it was going to be like, *OK, I won't do that again, but goddamn I'm gonna miss it*. I really don't. It is funny. I really just don't, which I take to be a good, healthy sign, some form of maturity.

Taylor: Do you find yourself thinking at odd moments about the IED that hit your vehicle?

Junger: Yes, I do. It is hard for me to know—I've asked people who know a lot about explosives—and it is hard to know whether it was just an under-powered bomb that ultimately the armoring in the Humvee would have protected us against, or if it really was a matter of ten feet, and had it gone underneath us it would have really messed us up. So it is hard to know if I barely escaped an awful experience, or if they just did not put enough powder in the thing and it never would have hurt us. I don't know which it is. I don't think about it that much anymore, but I certainly thought about it a lot afterwards. There's a lot of things in war like that. There's a lot of things in life like that. When you realize a lot of this stuff's random, that's a hard thing to reconcile with the idea that you have some say in your life.

A Master of Fact

John McPhee's deft reporting, as sharp in 2011 as in 1996, continues to influence generations of writers

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Silk Parachute

By John McPhee

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

227 pages

\$15

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John McPhee is a writer known for taking obscure topics and making them fascinating. As McPhee came to Nashville to accept the eighth Nashville Public Library Literary Award and give a public reading in November 2011, journalist Michael Ray Taylor reflected on the author's influence on him, his generation and the craft of creative nonfiction.

I have been teaching nonfiction writing for 27 years—the past 20 as a full-time professor. At some point during almost every class, I tell students that if they really want to write well, they should try to be more like John McPhee. For 46 years, McPhee has produced quietly brilliant work for the *New Yorker* and (very rarely) other magazines, longish “fact pieces,” as they call

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them at the *New Yorker*, that often wind up as books. While he writes nonfiction exclusively, he defies easy categorization. He deeply investigates subjects as varied as sports (basketball, tennis, golf, lacrosse); geology (hard rock, tectonic, volcanic, sedimentary); canoes building; roadkill consumption; oranges growing; and fish studies, to name a few. He always writes in the first person, yet almost never writes autobiographically, almost never becomes a principle character in whatever story he sets out to tell. He developed his style concurrently with the rise of New Journalism, but he exhibits neither the manic experimentation of a Tom Wolfe nor the narcissistic indulgence of a Hunter S. Thompson. He simply writes beautiful sentences about interesting things and people.

McPhee has also been a teacher of writing at Princeton since 1975. Perhaps as a result of his teaching, the world knows a great deal about his reporting and writing methods. Among the McPhee tips routinely repeated in journalism schools: ask the same question in slightly different ways until your exasperated interview subject concludes you are an idiot, and answers in simple, vivid quotes that any idiot can understand; read as many books on your topic as you can find, no matter how obscure; place scenes and characters and interesting facts on note cards, then shuffle their order continuously in search of the perfect story structure; and keep a couch in your office, so that if you are ever stuck while writing, you can take a short nap and wake inspired.

I started writing for magazines at the same time I started teaching, and even as a 23-year-old graduate assistant, I realized I was not unique in telling students that if they want to produce quality nonfiction, they should try to imitate McPhee. A generation of writing teachers have said this, some of whom were McPhee's students, like Tracy Kidder, who became a famously successful writer and teacher himself. In the mid-1980s, when I was a student of the late Bill Emerson, a legendary former editor at *Newsweek*, *Look* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, he once read aloud to the class McPhee's description of Fred Brown, a resident of Hog Wallow, a hamlet (although I doubt McPhee would himself stoop to such a pun) of New Jersey's Pine Barrens. I had already encountered that passage of McPhee's 1968 book on the region, and underlined it on my own. Although Mr. Brown was a fairly ordinary retiree, living in an obscure shack, and although he was but one of countless characters McPhee has described with wit and warmth, his description sticks in the memory, on a literary par with the first descriptions of Jay Gatsby and Mr. Darcy. It may be the most vivid of a nonfiction interview subject ever penned in English. Here is a little taste:

I called out to ask if anyone was home, and a voice called back, "Come in. Come in. Come on the hell in."

I walked through a vestibule that had a dirt floor, stepped up into a kitchen, and went into another room that had several overstuffed chairs in it and a porcelain-topped table, where Fred Brown was seated, eating a pork chop. He was dressed in a white sleeveless shirt, ankle-top shoes, and undershorts. He gave me a cheerful greeting and, without asking why I had come or what I wanted, picked up a pair of khaki trousers that had been tossed onto one of the overstuffed

chairs and asked me to sit down. He set the trousers on another chair, and he apologized for being in the middle of his breakfast, explaining that he seldom drank much but the night before he had had a few drinks and this had caused his day to start slowly. "I don't know what's the matter with me, but there's got to be something the matter with me, because drink don't agree with me anymore," he said. He had a raw onion in one hand, and while he talked, he shaved slices from the onion and ate them between bits of the chop.

Over the course of several pages, the reader comes to know Fred Brown and his cluttered house in the Barrens as fully as any of the sharecroppers and their cabins depicted in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, but with more surprising and often gently humorous observations. Through Fred Brown, the reader also begins to know something about the region, and to care about it as deeply as Brown does. This is McPhee's genius: he is constantly writing about interesting characters in such a way that readers don't even notice they are absorbing interesting facts.

McPhee has published, on average, a book every 18 months since he began writing for *The New Yorker*; he is now up to twenty-eight. In his most recent collection, *Silk Parachute*, published in 2010 and now out in paper, the eighty-year-old author seems, in his usual quiet and self-deprecating way, to have noticed the fact of his age. He has thus, apparently, decided to share more of himself than in any of his earlier books. The title comes from a very short preface about his childhood, his mother, and a favored toy: a black rubber ball, bought at LaGuardia airport in the 1930s, containing a silk parachute. "If you threw it high into the air, the string unwound and the parachute blossomed," McPhee explains. "If you sent it up with a tennis racquet, you could put it into the clouds. Not until the development of the multi-megabyte hard disk would the world ever know such a fabulous toy."

Over the course of eight fairly recent articles that make up the book, McPhee investigates the usual eclectic mix of topics—English chalk, Lacrosse, large format photography, eating odd wildlife, and so on—but uniquely in his body of work, the characters through which these topics are introduced—the Fred Browns—are McPhee himself, members of his immediate family, and a couple of longtime personal friends. Progressing through them, you realize that he is sharing the life of a man whose marvelous talent has been his fabulous toy. "Folded just so, the parachute never failed," he writes in the preface. "Always, it floated back to you—silky, beautifully—to start over and float back again. Even if you abused it, whacked it really hard—gracefully, lightly, it floated back to you."

Appropriately, the short essay that serves as the book's afterword explains McPhee's reasons for choosing to live his entire life in Princeton, New Jersey. Gracefully, lightly, and not at all accidentally, he ends with his most noted character:

I remember Fred Brown, who lived in the Pine Barrens of the New Jersey Coastal Plains, remarking years ago outside his shanty: "I never been nowhere

where I liked it better than I do here. I like to walk where you can walk on level ground. Outside here, if I stand still, fifteen or twenty quail, couple of coveys, will come and go around. The gray fox don't come nearer than the swamp there, but I've had coons come in here; the deer will come up. Muskrats breed right here, and otters sometimes. I was to Tennessee once. They're greedy, hungry, there, to Tennessee. They'll pretty near take the back off your hand when you lay down money. I never been nowhere I liked better than here."

There is no place I would rather be than with a new McPhee book in hand. I treasure the hope that there may be more to come, just as I look forward to that day each semester when I am trying to explain narrative description to reporting students, and Fred Brown floats back to me.

The Slovenly Wilderness

David George Haskell's stunning meditation on a patch of Tennessee forest gives insight to all of nature.

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The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature
By David George Haskell
ISBN 978-0670023370
Viking
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\$22.95

Not quite a century ago, Wallace Stevens published a much discussed little poem, "Anecdote of the Jar:"

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.*