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Inflection & the Narrative Voice:

The L.A.P.D.

Teaches Creative Writing

by Ellen Collett

Monday through Friday, I'm enthralled by a man I've never met. His name is Martinez and he's a cop with the Los Angeles Police Department.

Martinez could be married, divorced, or single. Tall, short, or ugly, but certainly fit. Statistically, he's a high school graduate. If he's had some college, odds are it was at night. The only way he's not a drinker is if he's churched up or sufficiently married.

Martinez works crime suppression in South Central L.A. He and his partner, Brown, patrol the streets in a marked black-and-white police vehicle with radio, computer, and tactical weapons in the trunk. They respond to scenes-of-crimes in progress and to the aftermaths of crimes. Every incident they investigate generates a written account.

I know Martinez only through his incident reports, as a five-digit badge number on a sheet of paper. In our precinct's Crime Analysis Division, I read and code hundreds of these reports each day. They're written by every serving officer on roster, and by design they all sound exactly alike.

Surprisingly, writing is the one constant in a cop's daily life. Whether he's assigned to vice or patrol, working bunco or undercover, every day on "the Job" he'll write. Most precincts have a specially designated room with computers and a plaque on the door that says "Report Writing," and these rooms are the only quiet places in a police station. The average cop hates spending time in these rooms—worse than on shoot-outs, stakeouts, and court appearances

In undercover cases involving a wire, an incident report includes dialogue. These exchanges may be fall-off-your-seat funny; like hearing Vice Officer Cruz solicit a threesome with two prostitutes without letting them touch his privates and so blow his cover.

put together. Only an Internal Affairs investigation is more abhorred, and there, at least, someone else writes it up.

Like everything in the Department, strict rules govern report writing; as with any dangerous undertaking, the Department will train you to do it properly. The most despised class at the Police Academy is the one that teaches writing. A measure of its importance is that a cadet can't be sworn as a police officer without passing it. Just as classes in weaponry, mobile pursuit, and forcible entry arm him for the streets, the report class prepares him for the writing life.

The incident report he'll learn to write is the narrative account of a crime—of a rape, robbery, murder, criminal threat, lewd act, vandalism, burglary, sexual molestation, kidnapping, or assault. Every event a cop responds to—every traffic stop, 911 call, nuisance complaint, and every door he

knocks on or knocks in—generates a report. It's written by the first responding officer to the scene or by his partner, depending on who lost the coin toss.

In structure and syntax, all crime reports are identical. They're written with neutral diction, and in the dispassionate uni-voice that's testament to the Academy's ability to standardize writing. Because they're referenced more closely to badge numbers than names, incident reports feel generated rather than authored, the work of a single law enforcement consciousness rather than a specific human being.

So how can I identify Martinez from a single sentence?

Why do his reports alone make me feel pity, terror, or despair? Make me want to put a bullet in someone's brain—preferably a wife-beater or a pedophile's, but occasionally my own?

How does he use words on paper to hammer at my heart?

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Like all great cops, Sgt. Martinez is a sneaky fucker. He's also a master of inflection and narrative voice.

To understand what Martinez gets up to on the page, it's helpful to know what the standard incident report is and does.

An incident report is the factual narrative of a criminal event. It tells only what happened: where, when, and to whom. Its timeline is from officer call-out to the booking of a suspect, but may end at a hospital rather than a police station if an assault or injury is involved.

An incident report offers multiple perspectives of the same event from the often contradictory points of view of cop, victim, suspect, and witnesses. Even when these accounts agree, no two people see things identically or invest their attention in the same details. Every focal point is unique; each person's agenda is inherently personal.

An incident report lists the inventory of all physical evidence collected and booked. Anything from shell casings and rape-kit underwear to a three-legged dog in a custody dispute.

In undercover cases involving a wire, an incident report includes dialogue. These exchanges may be fall-off-your-seat funny; like hearing Vice Officer Cruz solicit a threesome with two prostitutes without letting them touch his privates and so blow his cover. Here you may discover that "fuck," in the mouth of one Miss Uniqué Jackson, is the most omni-dextrous word in the English language, capable of being a noun, verb, adverb, dangling participle, conjunction, and interjection all in the same sentence, not to mention something that carries jail time if you offer to do it for money with a cop.

In structure, an incident report is a strict chronological narrative. It begins with a Source of Activity section, followed by the Investigation and then Witness Statements.

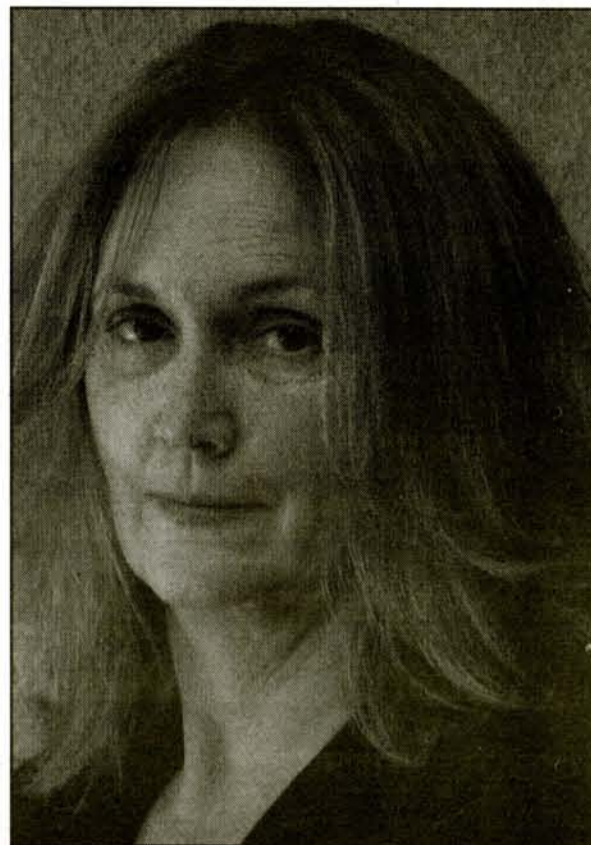
The S. of A. tees up the story. It's where the narrator introduces himself and offers his credentials for telling this tale: "On 4-6-10 at approx. 1922 hours, my partner Ofcr. Brown (badge #13312) and I (Ofcr. Martinez badge #14231) were in full uniform travelling westbound on Gage Avenue when we received the radio call of an LUAC in progress at 82nd St./Central Ave." If the officer has specific expertise, like advanced training with Gang Suppression, or undercover experience in Vice, it's noted here. Expertise adds legitimacy without unduly personalizing the cop narrator.

S. of A. gives us "in medias res" context: who, where, when, and what. It also introduces the narrative voice.

In the Investigation section that follows, the "I" narrator tells briefly what his investigation revealed. He lists the actions taken by himself and his partner, and the facts of the case as discovered. The strict emphasis here is on verifiable information.

If versions of the event differ from his, these are recorded as Witness Statements. These can be summaries, but verbatim quotes are often included. The officer interviews and makes notes in the field, but because his priority is processing a crime scene, his actual report is written up later at the station before he goes off shift. This physical remove, and the time lag from crime to composition of the report, afford him emotional distance from the event, a tone reflected in the writing.

The narrative voice at the center of an incident report is always emotionally neutral. He's the



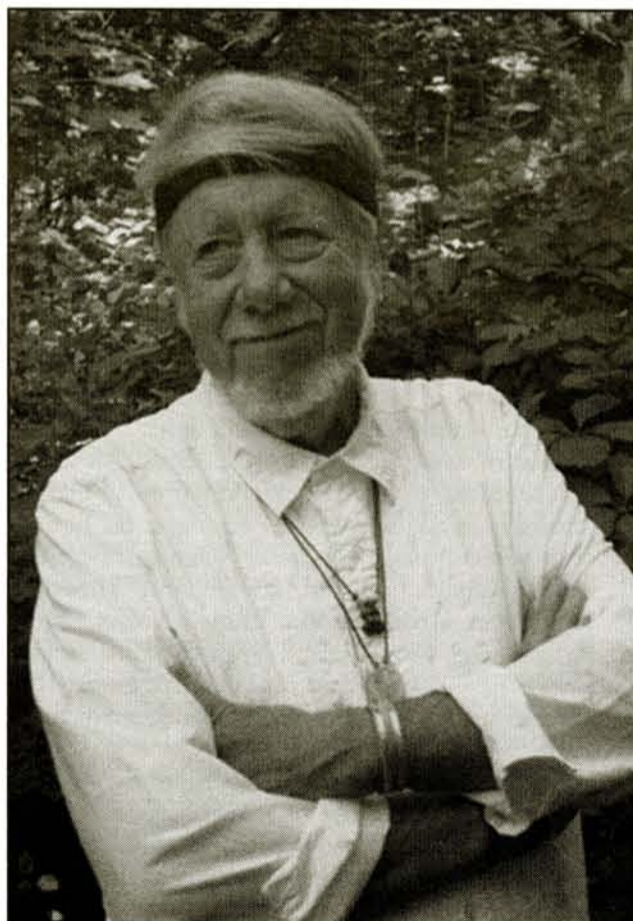
Ellen Collett

ultimate reliable narrator. His sole job is to convince us that everything he tells us is the absolute truth.

How does he do this?

The Academy's glad you asked. It all begins with diction.

At the micro-level, cadets are taught to write with care and deliberation, to choose each word for



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Precision, not firepower, is the goal; you don't use a semi-auto at close range when you're packing a Smith & Wesson. Good cop diction means checking each word in a sentence to verify it can mean only one thing.

maximum accuracy. Precision, not firepower, is the goal; you don't use a semi-auto at close range when you're packing a Smith & Wesson. Good cop diction means checking each word in a sentence to verify it can mean only one thing. Novelist José Saramago wrote, "One cannot be too careful with words; they change their minds just as people do," and the L.A.P.D. demands words that defy interpretation.

Subjectivity in diction is a no-no. An incident report strives for neutrality. The officer's job is to convey what happened without implying an opinion about it. He's present at the scene as an expert observer, and has no personal agenda. He must avoid words that carry associations, subtext, emphasis, or bias.

Officers are encouraged to use action verbs in preference to "is" and "has." "Is" and "has" speak to abstractions—existence and possession, respectively—and where they go, descriptors follow. Action verbs on the other hand, move us through time and space. "The Subject removed a hammer from the kitchen drawer and struck the Victim three times on the head and neck" is a good sentence. It tells what physically happened without embellishment.

Avoid modifiers, says the Academy. Adverbs are slippery and subjective; they shade reality and opine. Any adverb can be eliminated by choosing a better verb. "The Suspect snatched the Victim's chain and fled" is a sentence without speculation. To know the manner in which the snatching or fleeing transpired would be interpretive. "The increasingly violent phone messages culminated with the Suspect's threat to kill the Victim and her children," passes muster only because "increasingly" speaks to pattern and repetition, both of which are evidentiary, and therefore, actionable.

The Academy dislikes adjectives unless they pertain to direction, color, or amount. These are "empirical adjectives." Because they speak to precision of detail, they resist interpretation. "The black Escalade fired twelve shots into the dwelling on 865 Inglewood Avenue," can mean only one thing.

Parenthetically, the two exceptions to the "no adjectives rule" are the words "bloody" and "suspicious," invoked to justify officer initiative in field investigations. If a Suspect "fled while holding his front waistband in a *suspicious* manner," it's presumptive of a concealed weapon. If an officer investigates a neighbor complaint and the "Victim opened the door wearing *bloody* clothing," there's pretext to enter and reconnoiter the premises. "Bloody" and "suspicious" aren't adjectives as used in police reports, but "adji-verbs," offspring of the verbs "to suspect" and "to bleed." They function as "open sesame" words, green-lighting action. Adji-verbs have a long track record of saving lives.

Simple, active verbs and the absence of modifiers ensure that the narrative in a police report is linear and concrete. Because a report tracks only action,

it's free of descriptions or details that might distract a reader from understanding the important thing, which is what happened.

That poster-child for cop writing, Ernest Hemingway, once observed, "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration." A good incident report also gives us the necessary shape of the thing, but spares us the cluttering details. Or, to quote a source dear to law enforcement hearts, television G-Man Jack Webb, it delivers "just the facts, ma'am."

These guidelines about diction and story efficiency also serve a deeper purpose, which is the legitimizing of the narrative "voice." The police narrator uses neutral language and uninflected storytelling to assure us of his credibility and to win the reader's trust. He never judges. The perpetrator in a crime report is always the "Suspect," even when fifteen witnesses, half of them preachers, see him exit his car and shoot his cousin at point-blank range in a church parking lot. Until a jury reviews the evidence and pronounces, under the law, no crime took place. The police narrator is careful not to imply he thinks otherwise.

The police narrator further proves his lack of bias by presenting everyone's version of the same event, giving equal space to the "truth" as reported by Victim, Suspect, and Witness. While he might state that DeWayne "aka Baby Insane" Johnson of the Rolling '60s Crips shot and killed J'Marcus "aka Lil Monster" Faye of Florencia Trey, he'll include Baby's explanation that he was merely examining the gun with an eye towards purchase when that muthafucker up and went off. The narrator's job isn't to judge but to relay facts to the best of his ability, and let the reader decide the truth of it.

Most of what the Police Academy teaches about report writing is very valuable to writers of fiction, especially in revision. Choose strong verbs. Beware of modifiers. Shun figurative language. Be leery of parentheticals. Avoid abstractions. Eliminate superfluous ornamentation. Omit needless words. Be concrete. Show what happened; don't explain what it means. But in the final analysis, a story isn't a report because it wants something different from a reader.

Arguably, words committed to paper always have an agenda. The purpose of a police report is to be cited in a court of law as proof of who did what to whom. Its ultimate agenda is justice. It seeks to protect the weak and punish the guilty. Because the stakes are high—freedom, death, or life without parole—it's written with special care. Above all else, it aims to be truthful.

At the same time, to do its job, it needs to be convincing. The story it tells should persuade twelve people in a jury box of something.

On the face of it, these two goals—truthful and persuasive—seem uncomfortably at odds. Shouldn't facts alone persuade? Should truth need composing?

And assuming it's possible to write towards this goal—to be truthful and persuasive at once—shouldn't all fiction writers want to learn how?

Which brings us back to that sneaky fucker, Martinez.

Martinez writes incident reports that technically follow the Academy's guidelines.

He avoids modifiers and descriptors.

He traces the physical action of an event without opining or speculating what it means.

He offers accounts that contradict his own findings.

He's succinct and factual.

He tells the literal and empirical truth.

He writes in the dispassionate narrative uni-voice that conveys objectivity and distance.

So why is Martinez instantly discernable on the page from a hundred other cops?

As fiction writers know, every story is told by a narrative voice, and voice reveals itself by what it sees. Voice is a synthesis of seeing and speaking, of sight and syntax. While syntax—the mechanics of diction—can be made to toe the line and conform to a particular "style," seeing is trickier to control. Seeing is choice. It's inherently personal.

Despite the neutrality of his diction, Martinez's choices are idiosyncratic. Everything he sees reveals him. And syntactically, though he bends every rule to the breaking point, you can't bust him. Put in cop terms, Martinez drops his personal throw-down at each crime scene he writes up. He may be guilty, but legally, you can't tie a man to an unregistered gun.

It's worth a look at how he skirts the edges.

At a Lewd Acts on Child crime scene, Martinez's partner, Brown, writes, "The Victim sustained multiple injuries." Martinez would tell us, "The Baby was bleeding from three orifices."

There's a world of difference here. Brown gives us a victim; Martinez gives us a baby.

Brown offers a fact; Martinez paints a picture.

Brown's statement moves us forward; Martinez's makes us stop dead and envision the horrific crime that caused such injuries. Both statements are neutral on the surface, but the specificity of Martinez's language makes the reader see and feel.

At the same crime scene, Brown says, "We placed the Suspect in a felony prone position and took him into custody without incident." Martinez would write, "We cuffed the Father." Martinez's version reminds us of the unnatural aspect of the crime, that a father (presumably) committed it. He edges near the Academy no-fly zone with "Father" in place of "Suspect," but gets away with it because the sentence describes police action—the cuffing—rather than any actions of the Suspect. Also, nobody disputes the fact that the Suspect *is* the father; it's the type of father he is that's at issue, something Martinez underlines with diction.

At the same crime scene, Martinez might note that there's "no food in the apartment." This is an empirical fact, so technically admissible. It doesn't speak to the specific crime of Lewd Acts On Child, but it does subtly add to the moral charges against the parents. Because Martinez observes it, we vest it with significance. It becomes inventory. To quote the inimitable Flannery O'Connor, "When you present a pathetic situation you have to let it speak entirely for itself. I mean you have to present it and let it alone. You have to let the things in the story do

the talking." Martinez inflects the barren apartment and makes it speak. Details bring scenes to life. Sometimes one image can tell everything.

The observed lack of food also reveals Martinez himself. He opened doors, maybe cupboards and a refrigerator. He noted an absence, something that dances dangerously close to an abstraction. But now we know something about him, too: he's a man who goes beyond the basics of what the job or scene requires. He looks to enlarge the picture.

Incident reports don't routinely specify people's clothing, but Martinez might tell us the baby was "wearing only a man's XXL T-shirt." The Academy doesn't forbid the detail. This image of a partly naked child drowning in her father's clothes has no overt prejudicial value. It's not a judgment per se. What's interesting is that most cops wouldn't take the time to write it down. But Martinez's agenda is to make us feel what he feels in this food-less apartment where something unspeakable occurred. Here again the detail reveals him. He looked. He saw. It means something.

In the Witness section of the report, Brown might say, "Victim's Mother gave no statement." Martinez would tell us "Mother refused to cooperate." This

carries a totally different emphasis and meaning. Martinez doesn't speculate if she's protecting her husband at the expense of her child. He doesn't need to. What kind of mother refuses to speak when her baby is bleeding from three orifices?

Examine these two versions of the same incident side by side. They admit the same facts. They're both truthful. But one—Martinez's—is also persuasive. Why?

It's subtly inflected in every line to signal its agenda.

Though it labors under the constraints of the report format, it uses emphasis and diction to suggest how we interpret what it tells us. It may look impartial, but it's aimed like a weapon.

From a strict moral perspective or the Police Academy vantage point, Martinez's incident reports are flawed. They're failures of objective reportage. Though everything in them is literally true, they're technically (to use the adji-verb) "suspicious"; if Martinez saw a baby-raper, he's making damn sure we do too.

Martinez's report has a subtextual agenda. It's to make what happened in that apartment as real and unmistakable for twelve people in a jury box as it

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was for him. He's not lying about a single detail, but he is using emphasis and inflection, his narrative reliability and his considerable writing skills, to make us see it his way. Martinez is truthful; his crime is that he's also persuasive.

From a reader's perspective, his incident reports are deeply satisfying. They engage us emotionally; vest us in the events he describes, and in the teller. They're narratives that hint at larger truths—about Martinez himself and the South Central universe he polices. They're deliberately authored and inflected, rife with the dissonances that make us think. They reverberate beyond the time it takes to read them. They offer a way to understand the world.

They feel suspiciously like stories.

If you read enough incident reports, you start to think about what a story requires. What's the difference between a story and a series of events? Why do Martinez's reports, out of hundreds, feel like stories? What's essential to a story, and how do we draw down on its beating heart?

One answer is that stories are made when someone artfully composes events towards an end. When a writer shapes events to invoke meaning, he deliberately arranges facts so they speak. A report means only what it says; a story demands the interference of a writer because it wants to say more.

There's a lovely literary anecdote about a blind beggar who sits on the street with an empty bowl in front of him. One day, a Poet comes by, erases the words on his sign, and replaces them with other words. Soon the beggar's bowl is overflowing with coins. "What did you write?" asks the beggar. And the Poet replies, "I changed 'I'm blind' to 'I've never seen the spring.'"

Shaping makes the truth persuasive.

The standard incident report as written by 99% of L.A. cops is the raw material for a story, but not a story itself. It has elements of story—characters, action, inventory, dialogue, and point of view—but what's missing is the shaping. Its ruthless neutrality keeps it from being something more than a string of facts.

Incident reports are good reading for writers of fiction in the same way blueprints are good preparation for building a house. They show the bones of arrangements that can shape good stories. Things like the merit of getting characters in play with one another instead of stuck inside their own heads thinking. Or that drama comes when people make choices, usually dubious ones. Or that following conflict offers more narrative opportunities than avoiding it. But at the end of the day, reports can't be stories because they resist meaning. A story is the thing that never resists.

It's life, inflected.

In his wonderful essay "You're Really Something: Inflection and the Breath of Life," Charles Baxter could be describing a police report when he writes, "The whole story seems uninflected, as if the writer had not quite believed his own story, or was agnostic about it, or didn't want to get involved in it, or was bored, or wanted to keep a safe distance from it or from the audience. Sometimes writers want to tell a story without being committed to it."

Baxter defines inflection as "the tone in which something is said," a sort of sub-textual authorial emphasis. He makes the point that inflection is a tool writers use to "direct" the reader's understanding, to put certain things into our mind's eye and guide us to infer something. Inflection signals meaning.

There's an interesting idea here that inflection requires pre-meditation. It's a deliberate act on the part of the writer. It's never "agnostic." To direct the reader's attention somewhere, a writer must first know what he wants us to understand. His story must believe something, and focus all its energies on revealing that essential thing. It must know where it's headed to make us complicitous in that search for meaning. Here is Baxter again:

You get involved in a story when, among other reasons, you get attached to a set of narrated events, or when the tone of the narrative has so many signs of emphasis that it rouses itself to life and disbelief is suspended. The story starts to believe in itself, and it often does so through inflection. You acquire the sense that somebody has believed this story. That's called conviction.

My Sgt. Marty Martinez has conviction in spades. He may be writing reports, but he's also using the alchemy of inflection to turn them into stories—narratives that believe themselves and make us believe them, too.

Martinez succeeds—or fails, if you're his L.A.P.D. supervisors—because of his commitment to what his stories mean. He continues to protect and serve because inflection isn't illegal, and you won't catch him at it. It's not a story, it's "just the facts, ma'am."

Like Martinez, a good story always has an agenda. Like Martinez, a good story is a sneaky fucker.

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