

TABULA RASA: VOLUME ONE

One of the regulars at a weekly Breakfast Club I frequent is a former Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who used to teach writing skills at a college level. Sometimes during our informal discussions, the two of us would agree that the best living American non-fiction writer is John McPhee (also a Pulitzer winner.) He's the author of some thirty books and since 1963 numerous articles in *The New Yorker*.

Reading McPhee is an acquired taste and a case in point is *Tabula Rasa: Volume One*, an autobiographical essay that appeared in the magazine's January 13, 2020 issue. Admittedly, the title is rather off-putting and the subtitle totally perplexing. A quick Google search revealed that the former refers to a theory popularized by John Locke that at birth human minds are a blank slate and that all knowledge comes from experience. But *Volume One*? Well that will soon become clear.

McPhee's writing style is straight-forward—no showoff vocabulary or convoluted sentences. His subject matter is virile: the Alaskan wilderness, New Jersey's Pine Barrens, navigation locks on the Mississippi, freight trains hauling coal, growing oranges, an encounter with a bear, building a birch-bark canoe. There are lengthy essays about sports figures such as Arthur Ashe, Bill Bradley and his former roommate Heisman Trophy winner Dick Kazmaier. (I was a Kazmaier fan as a kid and wrote McPhee a thank you note after that one.)

Indeed, Princeton sports was a frequent theme—perhaps even may have influenced his literary approach. Growing up a townie, McPhee's father was the football team's physician and young John served as the official mascot. His cousin Frank McPhee was Kazmaier's teammate and an All-American end and the McPhee family's next door neighbor was the head football coach. For thirty years the gnome-like basketball coach Pete Carril

popularized what became known as “The Princeton Offense” that was characterized by constant movement and “back door cuts.” Bill Bradley excelled in it and, likewise, precision and simplicity were Hallmarks of McPhee’s style.

In his book *Draft No. 4 John McPhee On the Writing Process*, the professor explained how to launch a literary project. “You begin with a subject, gather material, and work your way to structure from there. You pile up volumes of notes and then figure out what you are going to do with them, not the other way around....It takes as long as it takes.” His advice to young writers who become discouraged was “Just stay at it; perseverance will change things.” (No doubt Robert Caro would agree.)

I savored McPhee’s sly humor present in so many lines in *Tabula Rasa*, effortlessly slipping in as asides. I littered my copy of the *New Yorker* with notes because, being nearly the same age, as a boy during the War, I too had searched the Bronx skies for German aircraft. I, too, worked in a genetics lab studying, and yes killing, fruit flies. I also spent some time in Spain after college so his references to El Greco’s rumored astigmatism and his famous landscape painting of Toledo resonated. I suspect that the fastidious Princeton professor would disapprove of my using the faddish LOL, but I did laugh out loud at his ironic image of Fernando Pizarro, the plunderer of Peru, perched on a towering pedestal and sneering down to watch McPhee being ripped off by a waiter in the conquistador’s hometown.

But what about the enigmatic subtitle of the *New Yorker* article? Following the example of the aging Thornton Wilder, McPhee decided that at age 88 was an opportune time to collect in one place many of his own never written about experiences—and then to just keep on going. He confessed to a friend his concern that the manuscript was approaching its end and publication was looming. But wasn’t that the purpose of the project, “to keep the old writer alive by never coming an end?” His friend’s advice was simple: **“Just call it Volume One.”**

Keep on living until you're not. That might be John McPhee's credo for all aging writers like me: *Volume One?* Write on!

Michael Nevins

“VOLUME TWO” APPEARS IN THE APRIL 19, 2021 ISSUE.

Note: Last month John McPhee reached age 90. Next month Michael Nevins will be 85.