

CELESTE FREMON

Anna's Shrapnel:

Recognizing the Revelatory Detail

CELESTE FREMON is an award-winning freelance journalist, and the author of *G-Dog and the Homeboys* and the upcoming *An American Family*. She is also the creator and editor of *WitnessLA.com*. She teaches journalism at USC, and is a Pereira Visiting Writer at University of California, Irvine.

“Show, don't tell” is the mantra of every good nonfiction writer. (Every good fiction writer, too, while we're at it.) And one of the primary keys to the art of *showing-not-telling* is the revelatory detail—the small but telling fact or action that brings a character more fully to life, takes a scene to a deeper level, illuminates a previously hidden theme in a narrative. These days, when I talk with students about how best to hunt down and make use of their own revelatory details, I first tell them about Anna and her shrapnel.

Anna Politkovskaya was a famous Russian journalist and non-fiction writer who was honored throughout the world for her powerful stories documenting the effect of two Chechen wars on ordinary Chechen people. Whenever Politkovskaya was asked to accept yet another writing award, before she left her Moscow apartment, she'd tuck a piece of shrapnel in her purse to use when giving her acceptance speech. She admitted it was bothersome to justify the shrapnel's presence to airport security officers. But she felt the hassle was worthwhile because, when it came to giving her audiences a window into the everyday reality of living in a war zone,

nothing beat the sight of that shrapnel. The small, twisted piece of metal was the revelatory detail that bypassed the intellects of her listeners and engaged them at a more fundamental level with the story she was telling.

Politkovskaya understood the concept well because, for years, she'd employed the same technique in order to breathe life into the difficult stories she investigated in her columns, features, and books. Since much of my writing requires me to persuade readers to care about stories relating to gang violence and other "unsympathetic" criminal justice-related topics, I found Politkovskaya's determination to cart around that shrapnel to be an instructive reminder that the right object or action, if used skillfully, can carry a great deal of thematic and/or informational weight when one is attempting to construct a compelling narrative.

For this same reason, I love the story that mystery writer Michael Connelly tells about his own first encounter with the art of the revelatory detail. (Connelly was a journalist before he hit the best-seller lists with his Harry Bosch novels.) He was working as a crime beat reporter in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and was assigned to follow a local homicide squad, which meant going to crime scenes. At murder sites, Connelly noticed that the squad's taciturn sergeant had the habit of pulling off his eyeglasses and resting one end of the glasses in his mouth when he squatted beside a body and contemplated the city's newest crime victim.

Connelly thought little about the quirk until his last day with the squad. He was in the sergeant's office when the exhausted cop again took off his eyeglasses and laid them on his desk. This time, as Connelly glanced at the glasses, he spotted something interesting. There was a deep groove in one of the arms of the sergeant's specs.

All at once, Connelly got it. Whenever this tough-acting sergeant was confronted with a new homicide, he kept his outward cool, but expressed his all-too-human internal distress in one, nearly

imperceptible way: he clenched his teeth on the plastic arm of his glasses. Hence the groove.

Connelly says that the groove epiphany has informed his writing—both fiction and nonfiction—ever since. Through that little groove, he was able to comprehend how a seemingly trivial but emotionally significant detail can deliver a very large wallop. For Connelly, the groove was analogous to Anna's shrapnel.

EXERCISE

Exercise One: Go to a public place where you are able to observe lots of people. Write short descriptions of five or ten individuals whom you observe, in each case using a single physical detail, characteristic, or telling action.

For instance, is that man's hair stiffened with hair gel or with old sweat? What does that woman's choice of footwear tell you? Notice the solitary teenage girl who, while reading, stirs her tea, then takes the hot spoon and presses it to her lips.

Exercise Two: Think back to an important experience in your own past—either happy or traumatic. Pick a single physical detail or action that embodies your feelings about that experience and describe it.

One more tip: when I'm researching a story, I always bring my digital camera to use as an additional note-taking device. Later, when I'm back in front of the computer, I often find that the camera has recorded a wonderfully revelatory detail that my eye has missed.