

## Storytellers

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My parents, all the way from sunny Australia, visited me here in Alaska recently and together we took a trip to Denali National Park for a few cold, snowy days last fall. We sought refuge from what my dad referred to as “the brutal and harsh sub-arctic weather” in the form of lattes and hot sandwiches at the visitor’s center, where my mother, the consummate shopper, immediately discovered the souvenir store. While mum browsed the shirts and hat racks, my dad and I wiled away the hours looking at some of the stirring photos on display. A postcard image of a wolf that was a captive animal pre-empted a discussion of photography, art, and integrity. That discussion, minus the one thousand interruptions from my mother inquiring about shirt sizes, colors, and styles, led to this column.

I certainly understand the idea that art is the whim of the artist, and it is unreasonable, even unhealthy, to attempt to legislate a code of consistency on the work of artists, i.e., censorship. What I don’t buy is the argument that we shouldn’t label art, and that we ought not expect, to some degree, truth in art. Artists in all mediums are storytellers. The story may be fantasy, a child’s fairytale, a personal narrative, social commentary, or experiential expression, even revelation, but there’s always a story. That’s what makes art a form of dialogue.



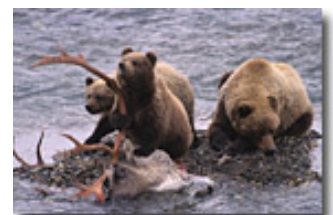
Implicit in storytelling is a chain of trust. The value of a story diminishes, probably to nothing, when that trust is denied. Without trust, our stories are meaningless entertainment, things to merely occupy our time. Trust, on the other hand, implies mutual relationship, and through mutual relationship we can communicate honestly with one another. It needn’t be stories of reality. I can listen to a comedy skit and not imagine the story to represent any actuality. That’s implicit when the artist stands up as a comic. Their intention is to make me laugh, not to accurately narrate an event and there is no pretense otherwise. Similarly, a Steven King novel is implicitly fantasy. It’s labeled ‘fiction’ or ‘science fiction’ and the chain of trust remains. However, if I learned that Thoreau had never lived in Walden, but spent his time as a marketing director or investment banker for JP Morgan in New York, writing his tales from a penthouse suite in Manhattan, I’d be sorely disappointed.



What’s critical here is the word ‘implicit’, for that’s the root of trust. A comic skit is an implicit fable. A fairytale is implicit fantasy. A work of fiction ought represent, to whatever extent it can, a reality or journalistic depiction. All photography, particularly nature photography, is to some degree inherently journalistic. It describes a reality. In journalism, as in all art, trust is requisite; much of its power and beauty lies within this truism. When I see a photograph of a place, I understand that this particular place actually exists somewhere. It may change with the passage of time, of course, like all places do, but it does exist. On the other hand, when I view a painting, I don’t have that expectation at all. Countless drawings exist of people, places and creatures that have never existed, and much of the power and beauty of that artful medium lies therein. Viewers of these drawings don’t require that they be illustrations of any actual physical reality. Similarly, when I see a black and white photo of a place, I don’t expect that the actual scene is monochromatic. I understand that the medium produced a black and white photo or description of the place.



Similarly, with photos of captive animals, the understanding of the audience is that a mountain lion is a wild animal. Hence, a photo of a mountain lion is that of a wild mountain lion. A golden Labrador, while adorable, is not a wild animal but is a pet, and the audience understands this. There’s no confusion here. How often, for example, are Labradors represented as wild animals? As with all stories, I’d certainly agree that the need to underpin this trust is image-specific; a photo of a mountain lion with a tennis ball in its mouth and a small child petting it probably doesn’t tell us the same story as does a photo of a mountain lion leaping a chasm in a red rocks canyon. One image implicitly carries a very different reality than the other.



And I don’t agree with the argument, so common in these discussions, that art and journalism are two different mediums of expression. Journalism can be one of the most powerful and artful

mediums of expression available to us. Henri Cartier-Bresson and James Nachtwey, while indelible artists, are both journalists. Writers such as like Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, and countless others, all both journalists and artists. Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Bono, and Sting are all artful songsmiths who also stand among the most poignant voices of social commentary of our time. Art has the potential to be more than mere decoration. It's an examination of our lives and our culture and in doing so, enriches both. When it serves no more purpose than entertainment or spectacle, it loses much of its intrinsic value. Without a story, art becomes mere decoration and nothing more than some "thing" to hang on a bathroom wall because the colors are complementary. Artists, as storytellers, facilitate something far more valuable than that. The stories that arise from our culture speak to the world about who we are, where we come from, what we are, and what we value. Art, in this sense, is an expression of identity. My art is an expression of my self and how I perceive the world, just as, collectively, our stories are an expression of our community.



Access to game farms and zoos, as with digital technologies and Photoshop trickery, is not a ticket to ride. Like any other tool, these ought be handled with care. To do otherwise is to dismantle the trust between artist, the art, and the audience. If photographers don't care to inform their audience that a given photograph is a fable, then I suspect it's only because, in their eyes, to do so lessens the value of their work. On the other hand, if we hope to maintain any artistic integrity, it's imperative that we promote our work with sincerity and with responsibility. An audience deserves a reliable understanding of the stories we choose to tell, be they fairytales of unicorns and jackalopes, or stories of our experiences with the world around us.

We obviously can't legislate this process, but I do feel that our community ought respect our audience, our art, our selves and our subjects enough that we nurture this chain of trust and treat it carefully. Trust is a fragile soul and warrants our care. Trust draws us together, and a loss of trust causes a disconnection. I don't pretend to know how best we might administer such an idea in a complex community like the world of nature photography, nor do I see this as reason to not tend to our audience and our art with a respect they both deserve. The fact that a reasonable direction might be difficult to navigate is no reason to not explore the terrain. We can look for a precedent to help us find a way. Literature is one example of an art form in which labels foster the trust requisite of any storyteller/audience relationship. Film is yet another. Nature photographers could do well to borrow from these mediums and advise our audience when we step into the realm of fiction and fantasy. A sky from the Grand Canyon over a Canadian mountain range is a deception to a viewer who, unless informed otherwise, expects a photograph to represent a place, not a passel of places. A photo of a wolf howling on high ridge tells the viewer a very different story than that same photo captioned "captive animal" does. While fantasy and fable do have their place, I feel it's fraudulence and spuriousness when the audience is not aware of the make believe. It's akin to passing off counterfeit dollar bills.

Trust, as we all know, is earned. It is also difficult to re-establish once broken. Artists, journalists, musicians, dancers, writers, painters, and comics, have a real responsibility to their art, and their audience, to protect a chain of trust that began long ago, when the first storytellers sat around a fire and enthralled their audiences with tales of the Dreamtime, and danced the dances that told of their journeys. The journeys of the storytellers continue today, narrated with a different set of tools, but the chain of trust is still requisite.

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**Carl Donohue** is a passionate wilderness advocate, and this love of the wild has taken him from the outback of Australia to the mountains of Alaska. His photography reflects this passion, and his love of nature is expressed with his camera. Carl's writings and images have been published both online and in print. His photographic endeavors have won competitions locally with the Southeastern Photographic Society, and nationally in Hooked On The Outdoors magazine. He is currently living in Alaska, working on his first book, a look at Wrangell St. Elias National Park. The rest of the year finds Carl guiding exciting backpacking trips into some of the most remote and pristine wilderness areas in North America. Visit [www.alaskaalpinetreks.com](http://www.alaskaalpinetreks.com) for more information on guided backpacking and hiking trips in Alaska, particularly Wrangell – St. Elias National Park. For a comprehensive collection of his stock nature, travel and adventure photography, visit [www.skolaiimages.com](http://www.skolaiimages.com).



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