

# MANLY CODES by Chris Anderson

When Chuck Yeager was shot down behind enemy lines in World War II, shrapnel wounds in his feet and hands, German Messerschmitts still above him, he remained calm and controlled. "Back home," he said, "if we had a job to do, we did it. And my job now is to evade capture and escape." When the engine of a fellow pilot failed during a later patrol, Yeager followed the plane to the ground, calmly giving instructions for adjusting the fuel mixture. "That was a close one," he said, once the danger was over. If Yeager had any feelings in these situations, he controlled them and wouldn't reflect on them later in his book. Repeatedly in his autobiography we are told of his reticence: Chuck "just isn't a talker," his wife says; "try as we might," one pilot remembers, "we couldn't get him to talk about his exploits."

Part of this is simply modesty. Part of it, too, is professional necessity, since only those capable of controlling their reactions and concentrating their energies can handle high-performance aircraft. The deeper issue, though, is Yeager's manly distrust of emotion coupled with an anti-intellectual suspicion of emotive language itself. He is both a country boy good with his hands and a highly skilled technician trained to react with unflinching efficiency in crises. He is a man of action, not words. It is only natural that he should "hate English worse than any other subject" and that he'd "rather fight a flame-out on the deck than battle a talk in front of a strange audience." Except for his own "pilot lingo," language for him is merely "BS." What journalists like to call the great "Unknown" becomes for him the great "Ughknown"—not a place of mysteries so much as a chance for screw-ups. "The Right Stuff" is merely an "annoying" phrase, "meaningless when used to describe a pilot's attributes. . . . All I know is I worked my tail off to learn how to fly, and worked hard at it all the way." For Yeager, claiming to have the right stuff would not only be immodest but also weak and emotional. From a West Virginia boy, such a claim would be uppity. From a test pilot, it would be imprecise.

In this sense, Yeager belongs in the company of two other plain-speaking narrators in American literature; Huck Finn and Frederick Henry. In contrast with Cooper's long-winded Natty Bumppo, Twain's Huck Finn is a man—or rather, boy—of action without time for "sentimentering." Because he is a storyteller, Huck's language is earthy, free of "frills," and in his stories he rarely reveals more than traces of emotion. His fondness for conversation leads him to narrate a book several hundred pages long, yet his redneck aversion to display keeps him from admitting how he really feels about the major events in his story. Witnessing violence, Huck remains almost closemouthed.

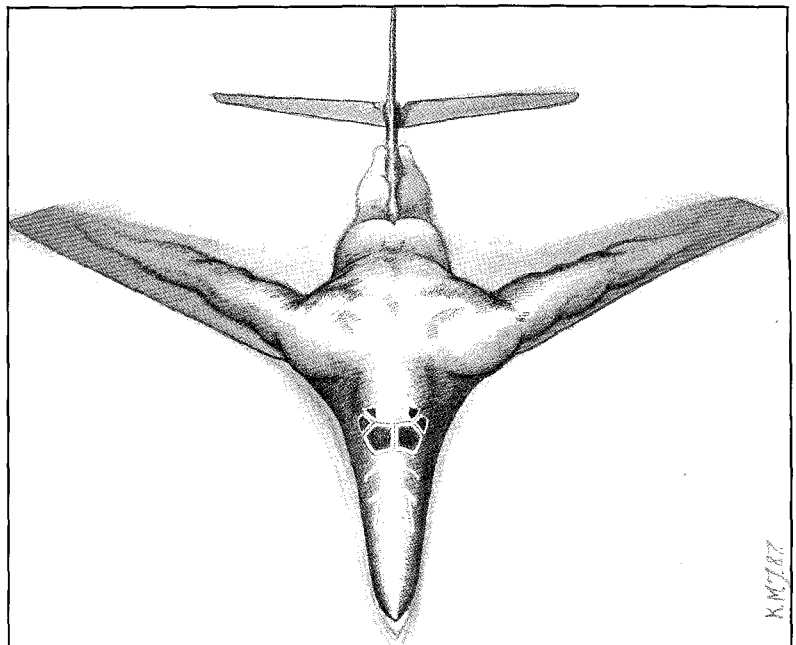
Hemingway's Frederick Henry is the epitome of what Walker Gibson calls the "tough" voice in American literature—a "laconic, hard-bitten, close-talking fellow,"

as Gibson puts it, who "conceals his strong feelings behind a curt manner." His reticence stems from a deep distrust for abstract words as "obscene." "There were many words," Henry says, "that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity." Perhaps the best exemplar of this philosophy is Hemingway's Robert Wilson, the hard-bitten hunting guide in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." When Macomber begins to emote about his first experience of courage, Wilson replies, "Doesn't do to talk too much about all this. Talk the whole thing away. No pleasure in anything if you mouth it up too much."

Wilson could be a test pilot. He shares with Yeager not only "flat, blue, machine-gunner's eyes" but also his verbal economy.

Yeager belongs to the company of movie stars like Gary Cooper (who played Frederick Henry in the film), John Wayne, Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood, and most recently, Sylvester Stallone. As Joan Mellon insists in *Big Bad Wolves*, the strong silent type has become the dominant model of manliness in American films since the Depression. With the popularity of *Dirty Harry* in the 70's, "male silence has been sanctified with almost religious fervor."

There are degrees and kinds of silence here. *Dirty Harry*'s reticence is a response to the verbosity of politicians and bureaucrats. Indeed, part of the power of the strong silent types portrayed by Eastwood and Wayne is actually their command of language. When they say something, they mean it. Statements like "Go ahead, make my day" become popular slogans because they condense the determination and righteousness of the reticent hero. The laconic style has been viewed as manly ever since the days of Laconia. The strong, silent male is more than an American phenomenon, since restraint and understatement have always been



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prized as rhetorically effective. Even the Athenians admired the Spartans' style. Later, the oratorical Cicero may have been less typical of the Roman character than the more taciturn Cato and Caesar. A refusal to waste words often signals an allegiance to language—there is a difference between the characters and their creators. Huck Finn is only an invention. Behind him stands Mark Twain. Hemingway's characters, for all their reticence, are brought to life in powerful, tightly organized prose. In this sense, even Rambo qualifies as art. To the extent that Stallone succeeds in projecting Rambo's brutishness, he is relying on—and endorsing—an artistic language which Rambo himself would reject.

But in the recent books by astronauts and test pilots, the problem posed by narrative is quite different. Aldrin's *Returning to Earth*, Michael Collins' *Carrying the Fire*, Walter Cunningham's *The All-American Boys*, James Irwin's *To Rule the Night*, as well as *We Seven* and *First on the Moon*, the same curious rhetorical problem as in Yeager exists: a fundamentally inexpressive male is called upon to write about his experiences—aided, all too often, by professional journalists. It is as if Rambo had to make his own movie, or Dirty Harry write his own book.

It becomes more and more evident as we read the autobiography that Yeager's reticence is not rhetorical but a reflection of his genuine aversion to talk. He is a real man, and as a writer he seems determined to get out of the conundrum of having to write. To begin with, he uses a ghostwriter, Leo Janus, who can easily be blamed for any excesses. It is obvious in *Yeager* when the ghostwriter takes over, reshapes Yeager's own syntax and vocabulary (sentences like "On the previous flight, the bullet-shaped X-1 had zoomed me into the history books by cracking through the sound barrier" are surely not from Yeager's mouth). The narrative is further vitiated by the inclusion of chapters called "Other Voices," in which Yeager's wife and colleagues praise his virtues—a convenient way of describing Yeager's courage and ability without forcing him to violate the code himself.

A more fortunate way out of the real man's rhetorical bind is Yeager/Janus' development of a folksy version of the "tough" style. After the first few chapters, the ghostwriter gradually fades, and Yeager's countrified, fighter-jock slang comes to dominate the prose: "ass over tea kettle," "bitch of bitches," "break my hump," "near to killed me," "bought the farm," "augered in." The sentences become direct and simple. Like Yeager's frequent references to his West Virginia accent, lack of education, and "bad grammar" ("He barely spoke English," a friend says of his tangled syntax), his brevity is part of an effort to establish his credentials as a masculine plain-speaker. His short utterances reflect Yeager's understanding of the kind of masculine stereotypes about language that William Labov studied in an interesting experiment several years ago: New Yorkers' expectations of a male speaker's performance in a fight went up as the speaker's use of standard forms of English declined. Yeager may be forced into writing about his experiences, but as a Hemingwayan fighter he can avoid the predicament of unmanliness by refusing feminine standards of regulated English.

Rather than betray exhilaration or fear, Yeager and other

pilots describe their experiences through what Tom Wolfe calls "codes"—stories, anecdotes, jokes, or concrete examples. They stick to the particulars, which then point to the feelings they want to express. Fighters become storytellers as opposed to emoters. Yeager as language-denier turns out to be a masterful narrator in his own vein as much as Huck Finn—though without Twain's ironic distance.

These same matters of masculinity and language are at the heart of an earlier book by Michael Collins, *Command Module Pilot on Apollo II*, who is quoted on the cover of *Yeager* as saying that "Chuck was never one to pull his punches." Collins, in *Carrying the Fire*, often adopts a Yeager-style gruffness. Like Yeager, he attacks the press for demanding that the test pilots express their feelings. Like Yeager, he is preoccupied with the technical intricacies of his work.

In many ways, *Carrying the Fire* is a better book than *Yeager*, and much more sensitive to language. There are a number of passages where Collins forcefully describes his personal feelings, without the aid of a ghostwriter. "What power," Collins says of maneuvering the T-38 fighter, "to command the position of the earth! What glee, to be able to do it smoothly and precisely!" Writing of his space walk during Gemini 10, he exclaims: "My God, the stars are everywhere. . . . We are gliding across the world in total silence, with absolute smoothness; a motion of stately grace which makes me feel God-like as I stand erect in my sideways chariot, cruising the night sky." Collins is not hesitant to communicate other feelings, either—the sense of "heightened consciousness" as he prepares for a mission or the tears he fights back when watching Apollo 8 lift off for the moon ("For some reason I felt like crying, but I couldn't do that in Mission Control, so I clapped a few good-working troops on the back and left").

More important for the ethos of the book is the literary ambition of Collins' writing. "I had left the tinsel-shiny, neon-bedecked high rollers of Las Vegas a few hours before," Collins says about his first visit to Edwards Air Force base, "ricocheting down the highway in an overheated 1958 Chevy station-wagon, seeking Valhalla or Mecca, or at least an opportunity to fight for admission into the arcane world of high-speed flight testing." Collins' sentences are balanced and sophisticated. The diction is erudite and metaphorical but not infrequently garish or even incorrect. "We dressed up in pressure suits," he writes at another point, "climbed to thirty-five thousand feet, got it going as fast as was legal (Mach 2), and then pulled back on the stick and zoomed upward as high as it would go. Trading kinetic energy for potential, up we would go, ever more slowly, until we floated over the top of a lazy arc in a not-so-bad simulation of the weightlessness of space."

Like Bumpo's, Collins' effusions are embarrassing at times. He often displays the hyperbole of the freshman composition student trying to sound like a writer. But the issue is not the quality of Collins' prose so much as its attitude toward the reader. Though *Yeager* is fast-paced, concrete, often humorous, it almost seems to violate a contractual agreement between writer and reader: Yeager holds back too much. We are soon made to feel that we are not a part of what Wolfe calls "the righteous brotherhood," and never can be. Yeager's writing is a temporary expedient

rather than an attempt to make us insiders to an experience.

In contrast, despite all its floweriness and *Reader's Digest* descriptiveness (and partly because of that), *Carrying the Fire* welcomes the reader. Long sentences and fancy phrases can also cover up feeling and exclude outsiders, but Collins wants us to understand, to experience, to enter into the Command Module and see what he has seen. Because he is on the side of language, he is on our side, and so we forgive him for his purple passages.

As we learn in *First on the Moon*, Collins had a reputation at NASA as a deflator of "gobblygook." He is quoted as saying that "what the space program needs is more English majors." He dedicates his own book to "Ferdinand E. Ruge, Master of English at St. Albans School in Washington, who taught me to write a sentence."

Armstrong and Aldrin, on the other hand, are notoriously laconic, "extraordinarily remote," as Norman Mailer puts it in *Of a Fire on the Moon*. *First on the Moon* reports that when Armstrong and Aldrin respond to the congratulations of ground control with a mere "thanks a lot" after touching down on the lunar surface, then fall silent, Collins' wife, back in Houston, asks: "Why aren't they cheering?" then hastens to add, half-humorously, "I guess that's why they don't send a woman to the moon—she would jump up and down and yell and weep." And, when Collins later enthuses over a large lunar crater by saying, "God, it's huge! It's enormous! It's so big I can't even get it in the window. That's the biggest one you have ever seen in your life. Neil, God, look at this central mountain peak. Isn't that a huge one? . . . You could spend a lifetime just geologizing that one crater alone, you know that?" Neil simply says, "You could." Though Norman Mailer praises Collins for his "easy conversational manner," "Irish elegance," and "graceful manners," in the world of Apollo II, elegance and grace make Collins an outsider: Like Francis Macomber, he may have queered the experience by trying to talk about it.

We might tentatively say that in *Carrying the Fire* a gentler voice sets itself up—perhaps inadvertently—in a kind of creative tension with the voice of manly silence. In *Of a Fire on the Moon*, his book about Apollo II, Mailer characteristically transforms this tension into a full-scale war. From the beginning, he rails against the inability of the Apollo II astronauts to speak in any language but a technological "code," incapable of "philosophical meandering" or "nuances of feeling." For Mailer the reticence of the astronauts transcends the issues of masculinity, although the equation of heroism and manly silence goads him into asserting his own manhood as a writer. In this sense, perhaps, Mailer once again betrays himself as an all-too-typical urban, effeminate male pretending to be a tough guy.

At first glance, *The Right Stuff* seems rather different from *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Wolfe remains absent from the narrative, recreating the experience of the participants through omniscient third person narration. Because of his authorial silence, Wolfe's sympathies seem to be with the pilots he describes, which is probably why Bruce Feirstein in *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche* puts *The Right Stuff* in "The Real Man's Library," along with Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. But it is difficult to believe that Wolfe

shares the pilot's rejection of emotive language when his own writing is subtle and figurative. Even in Wolfe's most successful recreations of the language and experience of test pilots, the very "foregroundedness" of his style—to borrow a term from Tony Tanner—interposes a layer of irony. Reading him we say, here is Wolfe amplifying, repeating, piling up figures: We never forget that we are participating in a verbal performance.

Since the experience of the astronauts is fundamentally nonverbal, the journalist is by definition an outsider, someone who does not have the right stuff. But rather than perceive Wolfe as trapped in this quandary, we can see him exploiting it for his own purposes. Because he has continually emphasized that the astronauts represent realms of experience inaccessible to the journalist, the densely textured language comes to signify his allegiance to verbal expression and his identity as a writer. His literary stunts, swoops, and dives are a kind of dogfight with his subject.

Critics have recently argued that the increasing importance of nonfiction as a genre reflects our lost belief in fiction as interpretation. Nonfiction is grounded in "fact" and devoid of the commentary and shaping we once expected from a Victorian novel. In this view, the genre would belong with Huck and Robert Wilson and Yeager, as a rejection of "frills" which can no longer be sustained in our accelerated culture. Still, both *Of a Fire on the Moon* and *The Right Stuff* are efforts to assert the authority of the verbal against the threat of the nonverbal style flying in the face of manly reticence on the one hand and technological challenge on the other.

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles*:

## Cultural Conservatism

"The old Episcopal Book of Common Prayer reminds us that we are surrounded by 'the communion of saints.' Indeed, in the course of life, one encounters a number of people—many in the most humble circumstances—whose impact is so intense that they are ever in mind. They remain a living presence long after they die physically. In such cases, it is hard to say whether the memory is less powerful than the man. And what, philosophically, is the difference between those physically alive but sleepwalking through their daily existence and those physically dead but alive in the being of others?"

—from "Transcendent Memory"  
by Anthony Harrigan





## Character in Acting by Forrest McDonald

*Franklin of Philadelphia* by Esmond Wright, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; \$25.00.

*A Little Revenge: Benjamin Franklin and His Son* by Willard Sterne Randall, Boston: Little, Brown; \$22.50.

To 18th-century Britons and Americans who devoted any serious thought to the subject of human nature—and a great many did—the conventional starting point was the theory of the passions, or drives for

self-gratification. Rousseau to the contrary, man was not naturally good but was ruled by his passions, both primary (fear, hunger, lust) and secondary (cravings for money, power, certainty, status). Reason could curb the passions only rarely and temporarily, and normally served merely as an agent of their fulfillment. Religion was still considered to be a necessary restraint upon them, but it was no longer thought to be a sufficient one. Given such a premise, the inevitable question arose, can man learn to comport himself morally, and therefore be free, or is he so thoroughly depraved that he

is doomed to be oppressed by priests and tyrants?

Among those who contrived to reach an optimistic answer, perhaps the most common means was to posit a second premise, namely that the social instinct is one of the primary passions: The desire to secure the approval or at least to avoid the animosity of one's fellows ranks as strong as the need to satisfy physical appetites. This belief underlay the 18th century's intense preoccupation with what the adolescent George Washington described as "rules of civility." Every kind of social interaction—from ballroom dancing to warfare, from forms of address to the complementary closings of letters—became mannered, structured, stylized. Every person learned the norms that attended his station, and anyone who violated them forfeited the esteem of his peers and betters.

All this is fairly well-known to students of the period; what is less well-known is the related concept of character. In its most general signification, character meant reputation: So and so had a character for fickleness or probity or rashness. But it also, at least among persons in public life and polite society, meant a persona that one deliberately selected, cultivated, and attempted to live up to: A man picked a role, like a part in a play, and was expected to act it unfailingly: one must always be in character. If a fitting persona were chosen and worn long enough and consistently enough, it ultimately became a second nature that in practice superseded the first. In the end, one became what one pretended to be.

The results, for good or ill, depend-



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