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## Rhetorical Analysis of The COVID Chronicles Carter Schmidt

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**Rhetorical Analysis of *The COVID Chronicles***

Carter Schmidt

School of Communication & Journalism, South Dakota State University

CMST 416 Rhetorical Criticism

Dr. Becky Kuehl

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*The COVID Chronicles* is a novel written by Stu Whitney, a veteran journalist who worked for The Argus Leader in Sioux Falls for over three decades as a sports reporter and editor and columnist. The Argus leader is the largest daily printed newspaper in South Dakota covering Sioux Falls and the surrounding area. Whitney decided to take a buyout with the newspaper, which created more time for him to take on his next writing project. He decided to write a novel focused on how COVID-19 arrived in South Dakota and how state leaders and South Dakotans responded to it, while weaving in much of his journalism career, childhood, family, the newspaper industry, and South Dakota politics. All the components were gathered and put into a coherent fictional story that reflects many actual events that happened. Whitney is the narrator, a veteran journalist, who was “caught in a tug-of-war between South Dakota politicians, and he was pulled into a militia with dangerous intentions. Someone died because of his crimes. Eventually, he landed in the South Dakota State Penitentiary” (Whitney, 2021). However, while Whitney never committed the crimes of this fictional character in real life, the examples he uses regarding the COVID response in South Dakota are prevalent. In this paper, I will discuss the historical context, rhetorical descriptive analysis, and evaluation of the *The COVID Chronicles*. How does Stu Whitney use his book to explain the events surrounding COVID-19 in South Dakota? In his novel, *The COVID Chronicles*, Stu Whitney uses rhetoric to describe events that happened in South Dakota at the start and during the pandemic by connecting with his audience coherently on how partisan politics and messaging influenced the decisions people made regarding COVID-19.

## **Historical Context**

### ***Subject & Purpose***

*The COVID Chronicles* is a novel anybody could read, but it mainly caters to people who live in South Dakota and can relate to everything that happened at the beginning of the pandemic in March 202 and throughout history. The subject demands the audience has a basic understanding of South Dakota history, so they can recognize the metaphorical representation of events that actual happened. Changing the attitudes of audience members is not always likely, because complying with the request of the rhetorical act could be difficult if the reader does not know anything about South Dakota. An example from the novel regarding the state's response to COVID-19, says, "When the virus first reached South Dakota and it felt like we were all under siege, the governor acted quickly, declaring a state of emergency, closing schools statewide and starting a series of daily briefings that delivered sobering projections about how many citizens could be infected" (Whitney, 2021, p. 21). The projections shared during a press conference in April 2020, said up to 70% of the state, or 600,000 people could become infected with COVID-19 according to the Argus Leader (Mitchell, 2020). The book later states, "But as the weeks went on and other states issue stay-at-home orders and shuttered businesses to combat community spread, Lawton took an increasingly hands-off approach. She urged South Dakotans to 'make good decisions' and 'wash your hands with soap and water,' a mantra of personal responsibility that aligned with President Trumps' downplaying of the crisis..." (Whitney, 2021, p. 21). Noem, who is presented as Lawton in the novel, is quoted in an Argus Leader article saying, "I am not announcing any new government programs, more red tape, more prescriptive phases or tight controls. That is not South Dakota. Rather, the plan I'm unveiling today puts the power into the hands of the people where it belongs," (Kaczke, 2020). The quoted material from the novel, and that of Governor Noem in news articles, describes her response to the pandemic and how it

aligns between the two mediums. For anybody who followed current news during the beginning of the pandemic would know what the novel is referring to.

There are many examples throughout *The COVID Chronicles* that represent real-life situations and the response to COVID-19 in South Dakota, but much of the pushback on recommendations from government officials could stem back to the history of public health crises and how they were handled. The novel could cause misinterpretation among an audience depending on their stance and trust with public health officials and government leaders. In an essay by Celeste M. Condit, she focuses on the how key public health experts reacted to the Ebola outbreak and how they were criticized by citizens, public health officials, and health scholars. In the essay, Condit states, "...governors disregarded CDC recommendations, instituting additional screening or quarantines, because, in the words of one U.S. representative, they were 'reacting to an absence of leadership and belief that the federal government knows what they are doing,'" (Condit, 2019, p. 178). Therefore, past experiences with top public health officials during disease outbreaks could play a role in the decisions governors made during the COVID-19 outbreak. In a KELOLAND News article regarding new CDC recommendations saying masks be worn by all people in schools ages two and up, Noem criticized the CDC by saying, "Changing CDC guidelines don't help ensure the public's trust. I expect our schools to remain focused on in-person learning for students this fall," (Yost, 2021). As discussed in the Condit essay and how governor's disregarded CDC recommendations because a lack of trust in key public health officials, it correlates with Noem's response in South Dakota despite those recommendations. Therefore, history of other public health situations and how the response to COVID-19 is represented in the novel could be because of responses to past epidemics.

### ***Audience***

The subject and purpose of the novel highlights the response to COVID-19 from public health officials, but the way the target audience perceives and relates to these messages from the novel is dependent upon the knowledge the reader has about South Dakota. Therefore, the rhetor can only reach the target audience if readers are knowledgeable about the state's pandemic response. For a reader that is not knowledgeable about the subject, they may be likely to misinterpret the novel's message. Overall, the subject is salient for the audience since everyone has been affected by COVID-19. In *The COVID Chronicle*, Whitney uses examples of real-life situations to relate to the audience; therefore, the message he is trying to get across is how people should do everything they can to stay informed in public health emergencies while getting information from reliable sources. For example, the novel talks about a COVID-19 outbreak at a meat processing plant (Whitney, 2021). Anybody who is knowledgeable about COVID-19 in South Dakota would know that example references the outbreak at Smithfield in Sioux Falls. A CDC report stated, "At the outbreak's peak, an average of 67 cases per day occurred. An additional 210 (8.7%) cases were identified among 2,403 contacts of employees with diagnosed COVID-19" (Steinberg et al., 2020). Knowing about this outbreak could influence the decisions people made regarding COVID-19 for their own health. Therefore, by doing their proper research, the audience can take effective action regarding COVID-19.

While the COVID-19 response from South Dakotans could be influenced from the history of other public health emergencies and knowledge of South Dakota, news coverage also influences whether people have trust in the CDC and if inattention to the health organization or news sources causes a lack of response from people. In an essay by Yotam Ophir, he says, "Crisis communicators provide the public with information it needs to make sense of developing hazards and risks. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, informing the

public about risks and ways individuals and organizations can cope with them could improve their understanding of crises, increase perceptions of trust and efficacy, and induce support for and compliance with the health organization” (2019, p. 547). The novel often compares how COVID-19 was covered by journalists in South Dakota and the response from public health officials and citizens. Countering ideas between the media and government leaders often left people in the dark about the decisions they should make regarding COVID-19. In an editorial from the Argus Leader from March of 2020, it says, “Leadership and clear messages are needed, as well as a firm hand. Such emergencies are well-suited for governors to take the reins and serve various roles – drill sergeant, information officer, calming presence – rather than relying on Washington D.C. for guidance or blame,” (Argus Leader Editorial Board, 2020). Comparatively, the ideas put forth by Ophir in his essay and those of the Argus Leader editorial explain that clear messaging from the CDC, media, and government leaders are crucial to get important health information into the hands of American citizens. The novel itself also highlights multiple altercations between Lawton’s (Noem’s) policy director and “The Daily Gazette” (The Argus Leader). These altercations often included anger on either side of a political issue, editorial or story covered by the newspaper, further proving the political battle between the two sides with different views of politics (Whitney, 2021). Therefore, whether the information is coming from the media or government leaders, mixed messaging can hinder American citizen’s ability of receiving accurate health information.

### ***Rhetor***

The subject and purpose of the artifact and the audience it’s intended for are both important aspects of the novel, but the rhetor in which the information is coming from also plays a big role in whether the message is persuasive and understood. Stu Whitney is a respected

veteran journalist in Sioux Falls and across South Dakota who was a columnist and editor at the Argus Leader for over 30 years. However, despite that track record, there are some obstacles that may arise with the novel and the point it's trying to get across. According to an Argus Leader article about Whitney and *The COVID Chronicles*, his writing background helped him accomplish a "long-time goal of his to become a novelist" (Huber, 2021). Furthermore, Whitney said, "I want it to say something. I think this world is pretty damn interesting, especially what just happened in this state and what's still happening in the state. South Dakota deserves an important novel about what we've gone through" (Huber, 2021). In the novel, Whitney uses real-life examples and news events that happened in South Dakota during his career and throughout the pandemic to write a coherent story the reader could understand and relate to. Because of his extensive past as a writer, he does demonstrate competence, trustworthiness, and dynamism (ethos) since he knows a lot about news coverage, politics, and history in South Dakota. Whitney had a dynamic relationship with his audience at the Argus Leader, because even though some of his columns may have been controversial, he was still respected, and people would always read them – I would argue the relationship remains the same with his novel. However, there is a constraint with the rhetorical artifact because it is self-published. "Whitney self-published the work because he wanted to write something about the pandemic before 'people would get tired of it.' The pandemic touched 'every single life on the planet' in some way, Whitney said, and he believes the event deserves more reflection" (Huber, 2021). The constraint presents itself since the message the novel is trying to get across to the audience is only told from the author and has not been vetted by a publisher.

### **Rhetorical Descriptive Analysis**

#### ***Audience***



While this novel could be read by anyone, much of its audience focuses on people in South Dakota; more specifically, I think people that read novel would have an interest in South Dakota's response to the pandemic and how Whitney portrays it fictionally. Therefore, I think people who could be excluded are those who do not live in South Dakota and/or would not understand some of events that are portrayed throughout the book. Another relevant group of people who may read this novel would be concerned journalists worried about the decline of journalism, or journalists that know Whitney and his work, hence the reason I wanted to read it for myself. The novel explains the decline in the newspaper industry saying, "Our daily circulation was down to 10,000 and would keep sinking, with younger generations disinterested in the printed product, if they knew it existed at all (Whitney, 2021, p. 16). Furthermore, there are many examples of how South Dakota handled the pandemic and how republicans took a far different approach to it compared to democrats. Therefore, those that have more left views may read the book and agree with its points, while someone with more right views may not. For example, there is a quote from the novel that says, "The virus was either a threat to the future of mankind or nothing worse than the flu. Shutting down businesses or events was either a prudent and science-driven gesture toward public safety or a drastic overreaction from health officials designed to control people's lives. Those who wore a mask and complied with restrictions were either responsible citizens or frightened sheep, fooled again by liberal politicians and media" (Whitney, 2021, p. 56). While I don't think the decisions made during a pandemic and/or public health emergency should be pushed by a political agenda, the thoughts expressed in the novel show each side.

### ***Persona***

While the audience of a rhetorical message is an important aspect to make sure an opinion is being delivered properly, the persona about the rhetor is equally important to develop ethos, so the author establishes credibility. The role the persona assumes in this case is a professional/expert writer who can explain actual events that happened around him in a coherent novel that is easily understood by its audience. The fact that Whitney was a journalist for 30 years in Sioux Falls and knew much about the political landscape, historical events and so many important people, shows he is qualified and a credible person to speak on those topics. I think Whitney could be seen as a peer since he is a fellow citizen and seeker of truth trying to educate people about issues across the state that may be hidden by government officials. For example, there is a part in the novel highlighting the extensive work of journalists at “The Daily Gazette” who revealed a South Dakota governor had used a state aircraft for personal reasons often during their time in office. “...The Gazette unveiled in a series that led to the tightening of state laws surrounding official travel and earned several national awards,” the book reads, explaining how the newspaper exposed the truth behind the use of state-owned aircraft (Whitney, 2021, p. 13). Therefore, a journalist is meant to be objective and always tell both sides of a story, so explaining that information to other citizens and holding people accountable is an important facet of reliable journalism.

### ***Tone***

The two sides of a rhetorical message could be seen as audience and persona, but the way the rhetor’s message or tone comes across will further develop their idea or opinion. In *The COVID Chronicles*, Whitney uses many ways to convey his message using emotional, dramatic, personal, objective, concerned, and satiric examples. The rhetor’s attitude toward the subject is encompassed by these examples. For example, there was an extensive explanation about a Huron

woman who died when the pandemic first started, the “Empire Foods” COVID outbreak in Sioux Falls, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally and how it was the country’s only event held at that size during the pandemic, and many flashbacks to the narrator’s past describing how he ended up where he is now (Whitney, 2021). With these examples, the author’s tone is seen as personal and objective because of the narrator’s experience he had as a journalist. Another personal example would include the narrator’s family, childhood, and vivid past explained throughout the novel. Emotion and dramatism were used to describe the Huron woman’s death and how it was covered in news stories. Two concerning examples could include the “Empire Foods” outbreak and Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, which both caused COVID-19 cases to spike.

Lastly, I think all these examples could be considered satiric, because they are all used in a fictional book where government leaders are often ridiculed and shamed for not doing more to mitigate the spread of the virus. For example, there is a portion of the book where an editorial was written by staff at “The Daily Gazette,” to the governor’s office asking more precautions to be taken to mitigate the spread of the virus – whether it was closing businesses and events, a mask mandate, etc. (Whitney, 2021). Regardless of the example, the tone is delivered in many forms across many different stories in the book – some from the narrator’s past, and some in the present.

### ***Structure***

Tone is important when telling the story, but the way it is structured is a big part of how a message can come across. This novel has a strong introduction and keeps the reader’s attention because Whitney starts the book with a narrator that is locked up in a prison for committing a crime that you later find out about. “In my present condition, as a 53-year-old inmate at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, I know that prison letters are hard to write.

Scratching words on lined paper; hoping someone takes them to heart, seems an inadequate way to explain how I went from respected journalist and devoted family man to convicted felon and shamed citizen, a sinking of fortunes uniquely suited to the soul-crushing year of 2020,” the book reads on the first page, explaining the situation the narrator feels being locked in prison (Whitney, 2021). Therefore, the author uses this introduction to gain attention and introduce the perspective of the narrator. The organization used throughout the book is not chronological and often explains events in a different order. I would argue this novel is told using topical development since it organizes material in terms of its facets, parts, and aspects. While reading the novel, I noticed that Whitney often jumped back and forth between ideas of the past and present. The book starts with the narrator in prison, then jumps around between each story of the past, such as how he ended up in Sioux Falls as a journalist, the newspaper industry currently, his childhood, raising a family, and more (Whitney, 2021). All these ideas and how they are presented give more context and background to the reader, so they can fully understand the story and what it means. The conclusion brings the reader back to the prison with the narrator explaining more about the reason he ended up there, summarizing the major points of the novel and how they intertwine in the story. Overall, a relationship is created with the reader by using transitions between each main point, what they mean, and telling personal stories that many people could relate to.

### ***Evidence***

Throughout the novel, Whitney uses examples and evidence a lot to reinforce his ideas. Many of the examples already mentioned include the “Empire Foods” outbreak, minimal mitigation measures by government leaders, and the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. These are all

great examples that tell the story about how the coronavirus raged through South Dakota and ignited political divisions (Whitney, 2021).

Some more examples I have not discussed yet were how the narrator's son was a part of his high school football team, which was in jeopardy of not having a season because of the pandemic; a building collapse that happened in downtown Sioux falls; tornados that ravaged through Sioux Falls; and the media climate today (Whitney, 2021). These are all specific instances that tell an overall story that is coherent and understandable to the reader.

There are some analogies throughout the novel as well. For example, there is a part that says, "They were avoidable circumstances stemming from reckless decisions that put people in position to be harmed, and they could be learned from it, if it wasn't too late" (Whitney, 2021, p. 102-103). This quote is used to explain a situation where the narrator's son cuts his hand while swimming under a dock; however, I think the way it is included could also correlate with how the pandemic was handled in South Dakota, because of a lack of mitigation measures.

### ***Strategies***

Having good evidence that caters to your audience is a big part of persuasion, but the way it is delivered to the audience is the selling point. Whitney uses strategy of enactment as a concerned journalist and citizen. For example, in an exchange with the governor's policy director over a "Daily Gazette" editorial calling for greater action from state leaders regarding COVID-19, the narrator says, "You need to stop making wild accusations and start paying attention to the growing list of problems that South Dakota is facing. Turn on the national news to see how bad it is" (Whitney, 2021, p. 55). This example shows how there is concern built up as a journalist defending his newspaper, but also as a citizen seeing his state on national news for negative

reasons. People who are concerned citizens may relate to this example since they can feel the problems firsthand in the state.

### ***Purpose***

Every aspect of descriptive analysis can help understand the rhetor's purpose. Overall, I believe the central idea of *The COVID Chronicles* is to help readers understand the pandemic in South Dakota through the form of a novel, which brings in many specific examples and political views to reinforce the stories, which then formulates beliefs for the readers about how the pandemic was handled in the state. In the novel, the governor said, "Time and again during this situation I have placed confidence in South Dakotans to do the right thing for themselves and their loved ones, knowing that lockdowns have devastating effects for many Americans" (Whitney, 2021, p. 25). This example shows the reader how the pandemic was handled in South Dakota with this governor's perspective. The overall subject is limited or narrowed to people that want to read about coronavirus in South Dakota with examples they may relate to. The response desired from the author would be for people to have an open mind and understand more about the pandemic and how political divisions have influenced decisions.

### **Evaluation**

How does Stu Whitney use his book to explain the events surrounding COVID-19 in South Dakota? Stu Whitney uses *The COVID Chronicles* to portray a message of how partisan politics and messaging influenced the decisions people made regarding COVID-19 by using real life examples the reader could relate to. Whitney is successful by using a novel to portray his message about COVID-19 in South Dakota, and there are people who read the book who agree with his claims. For example, one woman wrote a review of the book saying, "This may be a

debut novel but it is clear that Whitney has been writing for a long time. I expect this to be one of the firsts in what will be a long line of novels that tell our stories of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Books like this serve a purpose greater than simple entertainment; they help bring understanding to our personal struggles in times of uncertainty” (Haynes, 2021). The book review shows that people who read this novel are impressed with how Whitney uses his power of writing and knowledge of events in South Dakota to write a coherent novel people can read to understand more about the pandemic in the state. Ultimately, Whitney is a former columnist, so he knows how to write stories based on his opinions that connect with the reader and make them think critically about the overall message.

*The COVID Chronicles* accurately represents events that happened in South Dakota, as well as the what the state’s response was to COVID-19. The novel represents a truthful picture of context and reality considering the examples used connect to real events. Whitney uses multiple examples of how the governor in the novel responded to the pandemic, which often correlates with actual news coverage of Governor Noem’s response in South Dakota. In the same book review as stated above, the author wrote, “Through a fictional story set in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the truth of just how divided Americans are is brought to life. Everyone will see shadows of their own reality in the pages of this book. Early in the pandemic, when people are feeling vulnerable and afraid, they watch from the sidelines as public health and disease mitigation become politicized” (Haynes, 2021). This book review shows how people felt while reading the novel and how it connects back to their own life and the politicization of COVID-19. The summary of this book states how the “coronavirus rages through South Dakota, igniting a surge of partisan politics” (Whitney, 2021). Therefore, Whitney portrays a message of how the

pandemic and state's response has become so politicized through a fictional story, which relates to the reality of COVID-19 in South Dakota and across the nation.

### **Implications**

There are many reasons *The COVID Chronicles* relates to partisan politics and people's decision-making regarding COVID-19 – but why do these findings matter? The applied implications explain how politics have influenced how society reacts to the pandemic. As stated earlier in this paper, much of the pushback on recommendations from government officials may stem back to past epidemics and how they were handled. In an essay by Celeste M. Condit (2019), she explained how key public health experts reacted the Ebola outbreak and how they were criticized by citizens, health officials, and health scholars. Furthermore, she discussed how governors disregarded CDC recommendations, like how governor Noem criticized the CDC regarding mask wearing (Yost, 2021). The theoretical implications of these findings show how communication about public health has changed even with the technologies we now have to address it. Kirk St.Amant (2020) wrote, “Global pandemics are not new. Nor is the threat they cause to local communities and the need to address these situations through effective communication and well-coordinated efforts on the local, national, and international scale” (p. 220). Therefore, the novel addresses the importance of communicating public health emergencies effectively using accurate science and data to back up claims – something that was lacking with the COVID-19 response in South Dakota.

### **Alternatives**

Stu Whitney does a great job explaining South Dakota's response to COVID-19 using a novel, but there are other alternatives he could have taken. Given the platform he has a being a



veteran journalist and former columnist, he could have taken a non-fiction approach to eliminate any confusion about ideas in the novel and its connection to reality. It would be interesting to see these examples in an autobiography, memoir, and/or commentary describing Whitney's past life as a journalist and the changes he has seen in the industry throughout his time at *The Argus Leader*. Furthermore, it would better explain what it was like to be a veteran journalist when COVID-19 arrived in South Dakota with real examples of everything he had go go through before taking a buyout with the newspaper. I believe the novel does a great job describing Whitney's life, current and past events in South Dakota, and South Dakota politics, but you can never be certain every fictional example he uses connects to a real-life example, which may limit the arguments being made about COVID-19 in South Dakota since the reader may not know what is fictional and what is related to reality.

## **Conclusion**

*The COVID Chronicles* is a unique book that focuses on how COVID-19 arrived in South Dakota, the state's response to the pandemic and how it was communicated, as well Stu Whitney's journalism career, childhood, family, the newspaper industry, and South Dakota politics. All these components were used to create a novel reflecting many actual events that happened in South Dakota. In this paper, I discussed the historical context, rhetorical descriptive analysis, and evaluation of the rhetorical artifact. In his novel, *The COVID Chronicles*, Stu Whitney uses rhetoric to describe events that happened in South Dakota at the start and during the pandemic by connecting with his audience coherently on how partisan politics and messaging influenced the decisions people made regarding COVID-19.

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