

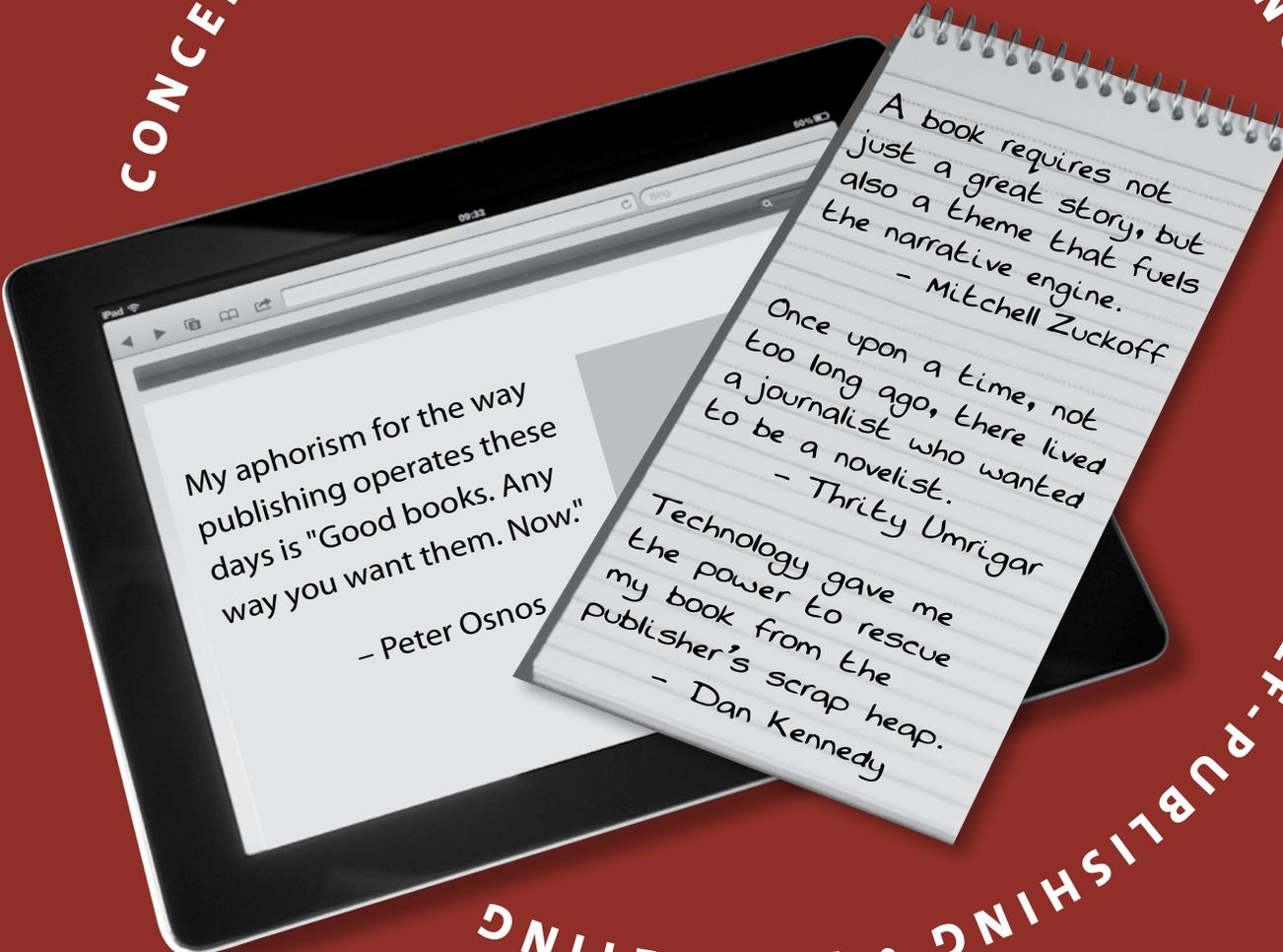
# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 65 NO. 4 WINTER 2011

## Writing the Book

CONCEPT • VOICE • STYLE • LENGTH • AUDIENCE • PLATFORM • SELF-PUBLISHING • MARKETING



My aphorism for the way publishing operates these days is "Good books. Any way you want them. Now."  
- Peter Osnos

A book requires not just a great story, but also a theme that fuels the narrative engine.  
- Mitchell Zuckoff

Once upon a time, not too long ago, there lived a journalist who wanted to be a novelist.  
- Thrity Umrigar

Technology gave me the power to rescue my book from the publisher's scrap heap.  
- Dan Kennedy

# **‘to promote and elevate the standards of journalism’**

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## Writing the Book

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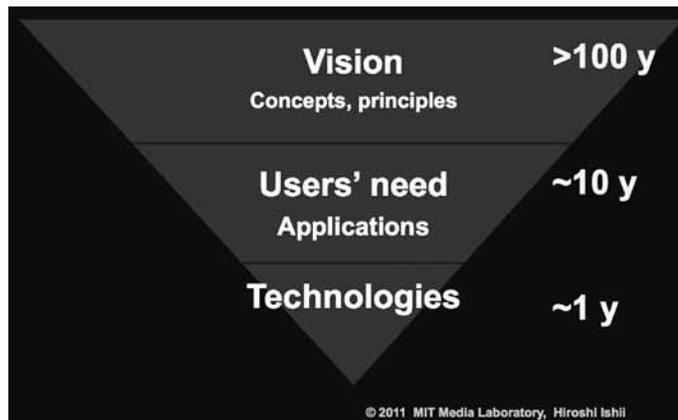


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## Guided By a Simple Vision

Not far from the Nieman Foundation's Greek Revival house on Francis Avenue, the future dimensions of media are being explored in the modernistic glass-walled zones of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab. On a recent morning I visited it with Nieman Fellows, and our tour began with Hiroshi Ishii, its associate director and a Nieman affiliate (as the husband of 2012 fellow Akiko Sugaya), orienting us to what's happening there.

High-tech projects—Ping-Pong tables on which fish images swim, bottles that sing when their caps are removed—perplexed and dazzled. Still, what stuck with me is Hiroshi's PowerPoint image of an inverted triangle. [See image, below.] Here's why: Sparse with words and numbers, it conveyed a convincing message—one I transposed from his ruminations about media to mine about journalism.



I was riveted by its clarity. While vision ripples for a century, how we apply technology has the staying power of a decade, and technology's tools come and go in a year or so. This image helped me to visualize ideas of endurance and transience, notions that until then I'd not seen so clearly. I realized then how these ideas informed the way Nieman Reports has tried to

tell the stories of journalism in our digital times.

During my 13 years as editor of Nieman Reports—a job I depart with this issue—waves of digital media have washed through journalism as disruptive forces and invigorating instigators of change. Newsrooms, too slow to adapt in the minds of many, are prodded now by the pioneering efforts of entrepreneurial entities. No certain business model has been found, though lessons in sustainability are emerging even from the failures of experimentation.

As technology's tools and gadgets, apps and platforms push us to reinvent how we do our work, Nieman Reports has kept its core focus on the journalism produced, as told by those who do it best. We ask "how" and describe "why," as we wonder about "what" and think about "where." All the while we adhere to the Nieman Foundation's mission of elevating the standards of journalism.

Technologically driven inventions like those being conceived at the Media Lab carve visionary paths that, in turn, will open up new possibilities for journalists; yet technology won't determine our ethical framework or reinforce our standards, inform our judgment or strengthen our practices that set high-quality journalism apart from other sources of information. This we must do, and that belief has guided my work as the editor of Nieman Reports. ■—*Melissa Ludtke*

## Compelling Story, Unflappable Belief, and Digital Teamwork

‘What I knew was that everyone who said there was no audience for this story was wrong. Not because I saw the future, but because I understood the present.’

BY GAYLE TZEMACH LEMMON

**W**hat do you do when the gatekeepers tell you it can't be done? The answer: Go around them. And if the old gatekeepers

have lost power, then who are the new ones? The answer: You. When I began pitching the story of what would become

my book “The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe,” I met a slew



Barred from teaching after the Taliban took over Kabul, Afghanistan, Kamila Sidiqi, right, found another way to support her sisters. She is the subject of Gayle Tzemach Lemmon’s “The Dressmaker of Khair Khana.” *Photo courtesy of Mercy Corps.*

of unmoved listeners. One New York literary agent luminary told me that if he had found “anything at all” in the story of an Afghan teenage woman—teacher-turned-entrepreneur—whose dressmaking business supported women across her neighborhood under the Taliban, he would tell me to pursue the book idea.

Unfortunately, he said, he did not. I swallowed, felt sorry for myself, and went to bed. And the next day I began again.

## Believing in Your Story

What fascinated me as the pitch sessions continued was that men of a certain age would nearly always give me the same, certain reaction when I shared my idea: a bored yawn. Women of nearly any age would almost always ask me to tell them more.

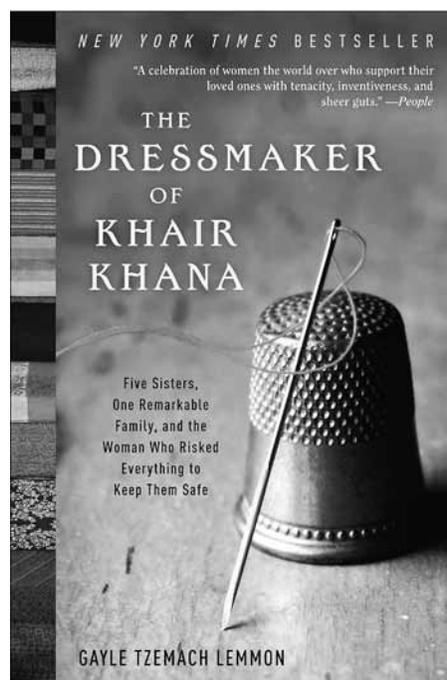
I believed in the power of the dressmaker’s story from the start. The tale of women who became breadwinners during years in which they were banned from their streets was only one extraordinary narrative I had encountered in my reporting, yet it stood for so many others. When men go off to fight, women battle for survival at home and make sure there is a place to return to when conflict ends. Their stories of daring, adventure and survival nearly always are ignored in a war narrative focused entirely on men.

Women go unseen and underestimated, and I sensed women had had enough of both. Telling the dressmaker’s story could change that. It could do its small part to honor brave and quiet heroes who dare to make things better, every day, in all corners of the world, without waiting for help and against great odds. I could not know then that a deepening global recession would make the story of the power of one to create change even more resonant for many.

What I knew was that everyone who said there was no audience for this story was wrong. Not because I saw the future, but because I understood the present. When I talked with women on airplanes and in shopping malls

and to girls on college campuses and in high school, I saw their excitement at hearing the story—and it inspired me to keep fighting. I kept every discouraging e-mail as fuel. I knew that if I could just get the story to women, they would find themselves in this story of resilience, faith and family.

Not long before the book’s publication I met a senior publishing executive who told me rather politely that it was “not like” “The Dressmaker of Khair Khana” would be a bestseller so I should enjoy the process of publishing my first book. Hearing that made me more determined than ever to make it succeed.



## Self-Marketing Push

In the run-up to publication of “The Dressmaker of Khair Khana,” my editor, Julia Cheiffetz, at HarperCollins, the book’s publicist, Heather Drucker, and I became rogue digital marketing agents, with assistance from Lisa Sharkey, who helped me bring the book to the publisher. Working as a team—combining the strength of our individual arenas of contacts and expertise—our strategy was to draw wide attention through mass media outlets and simultaneously target niche audiences of interest and influence.

I got in touch with former newsroom colleagues and friends at ABC News, who helped secure media bookings. Tina Brown and The Daily Beast, for whom I reported from Afghanistan, scheduled an excerpt. I called, e-mailed and tweeted within as many different networks as I could think of that would be natural audiences and allies for the book. Still, we wanted to reach out to more groups. Soon I was connecting with women in 85 Broads, the business network, and to development nonprofits such as Bpeace and Dining for Women. I got in touch with Harvard Business School, where I began my reporting for this book during my studies for a master’s in business administration. We received support from Goldman Sachs’s 10,000 Women, which reaches worldwide to serve underserved female entrepreneurs with business education, and the International Center for Research on Women. And I reconnected with the Thunderbird School of Global Management, which I mention in the book.

Meanwhile, Drucker pitched non-stop to radio and TV for interviews, to book bloggers and mom bloggers for posts about the book, and Julia built a network of women leaders who felt strongly that the dressmaker’s story should be told. They became our champions, and soon, with them reaching their friends and contacts, our circles of influence expanded.

When book bloggers wrote about “The Dressmaker,” I’d find out and reply quickly to let them know that I would gladly do a Q. and A. for their sites. When the online SITSGirls offered to make “The Dressmaker” their book club selection, we leapt at the chance. HarperCollins offered a book giveaway to the hip fashion site Modcloth, and Cheiffetz reached out to the online crafting powerhouse Etsy, where we hosted a Twitter discussion about the power of women entrepreneurs to create change. And when I met the very gracious (and wildly successful) author Deepak Chopra in a CNBC green room, Cheiffetz followed up by writing to see whether, given his belief in the power of women to change the world, he would be willing to tweet

about “The Dressmaker.” He was. And we were on our way.

Glittering reviews in places such as People and O Magazine were incredibly powerful, and so were readers who found out about the book online. Twitter was a potent engine for spreading the word and so were bloggers. My book was one of the first nonfiction bestsellers at HarperCollins in which the e-book outsold the hardcover.

By using social media effectively, the power was ours to quickly and directly connect with people as they’d hear about “The Dressmaker” on radio interviews or Facebook, for example. Homeschooling moms tweeted about the book, and I wrote back to let them know that their support made a difference—something that may have been a new experience for them and others who posted words about it. A

pretzel entrepreneur in Chicago wrote to me on my website about how the book taught her that if a girl could start a business under the Taliban, she could surely work around obstacles she faced in her enterprise. Dads in Alaska posted on Facebook about how they hoped their daughters would share the dressmaker’s values. And women booksellers would stop me at book events to say, “My boss was surely surprised you were a bestseller. I was thrilled to put your book on the shelf and show him he was wrong.”

This was the right moment for a little story that could about an entrepreneur who never believed she could not. But that didn’t alone guarantee its success. My job as its author was to keep in touch with the audience that had propelled us forward, the one who knew, as we did, that women’s

stories are war stories, too. These were people who knew stories like this one excite and inspire. Our army of champions—underestimated by many, connected by technology, and eager to be heard—enabled my book to succeed. And its success became theirs, too. ■

*Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, author of “The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe,” is a contributing editor at large at Newsweek and The Daily Beast. She is a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, where she serves as deputy director of its Women and Foreign Policy program. More of her work is at [www.gaylelemmon.com](http://www.gaylelemmon.com) and on Facebook; she tweets @gaylelemmon.*

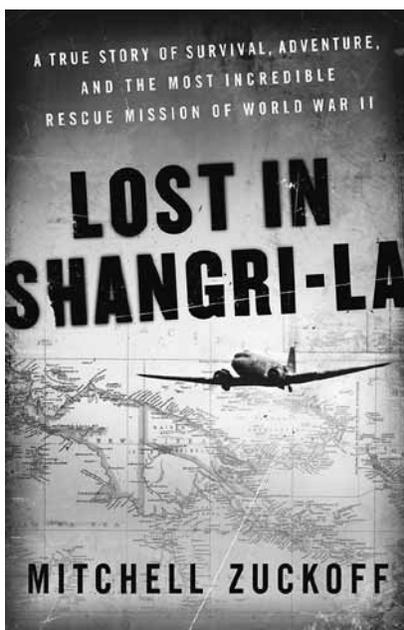
## Feeling It’s a Book, Then Pausing to Wonder If It Is

‘Does the fact that this story hasn’t been told mean that there’s not enough to tell it?’

BY MITCHELL ZUCKOFF

**T**he great director Robert Altman had a stock line whenever people asked him for advice: “Don’t take advice.” With that in mind, I come hesitantly to the task of giving writing advice, knowing that every writer is unique and brings different tools to the job. What I can do, however, is describe some of the experiences I had while researching and writing my recent book, “Lost in Shangri-La: A True Story of Survival, Adventure, and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II,” in the hope that other writers might find them useful, or at least satisfyingly familiar.

To state the obvious, there’s no book without a book-worthy idea. “Lost in Shangri-La” began for me with a happy accident. I was researching what I



thought might be a World War II story that could sustain a book (and my interest) by indulging in one of my favorite research activities: reading newspaper archives. There’s no better way I know to immerse myself in a particular place or time that isn’t my own. From the placement and tone of stories and photos to the prices in the ads, newspapers are to writers of historical nonfiction what tar pits are to archaeologists. Even if I think I know what I’m looking for, I engage in what seems like the time-wasting activity of letting my eyes wander over random headlines, down columns of agate-type classified ads, through impassioned editorials about issues of fleetingly momentous importance. When I’m doubting a project, usually

because I'm bored or disappointed by it, I find myself spending unbroken hours feeding my historic newspaper habit.

That was the case with my original World War II idea, which I had begun to realize would make a decent magazine-length story but couldn't possibly sustain a book, at least not how I was then envisioning it. To me, a book requires not just a great story, but also a theme that fuels the narrative engine. In my oversimplified explanation, my books have been about, respectively, life, death, money, art and war. (I only half-jokingly say that I'm working my way up to sex.) Rather than force myself back to it, I aimlessly scanned through microfilm of dozens of Chicago Tribunes from 1945 when I came upon a headline that read: "Clouds Defeat Hidden Valley Rescue Effort: Glider Snatch Waits on Good Weather."

Huh? The story described how this valley on the island of Dutch New Guinea, nicknamed "Shangri-La" by United States Army airmen and war correspondents, had become a temporary home to three survivors of a plane crash, one a beautiful woman, and a team of paratroopers who'd volunteered to protect them from the Stone Age natives who lived there. It further explained that the military's rescue plan involved dropping huge gliders to the valley floor, where, if everything went well, they'd await low-flying planes that would snatch them back into the air—with the survivors and paratroopers aboard.

How, I wondered, was this possible? Not just the gliders and the Stone Age tribesmen, but the very existence of what seemed like an amazing, untold story of World War II. It seemed too good to be true, and having already written a book about the original Ponzi scheme, I was especially wary of anything that fit that description. Yet with a little digging, it became clear that with the exception of a collection of reprinted documents, profile sketches, and short essays, the story had remained virtually unknown and untold at book length.

The next question reflects the deeply held skepticism of all reporters: Does



Margaret Hastings was one of three survivors of a plane crash in Dutch New Guinea in World War II. She held the rank of corporal but she is wearing a jacket with sergeant's stripes that was dropped in. *Photo by C. Earl Walter, Jr.*

the fact that this story hasn't been told mean that there's not enough to tell it? I've walked away from more potential ideas than I care to think about because there wasn't a "critical mass" of sources—documentary and, if recent enough, human—to sustain a nonfiction narrative of something like 100,000 words.

### Starting With Earl

In this case, after the disappointment of learning that the three survivors had since died, I had the incredible good fortune of finding the leader of the paratrooper rescue team, C. Earl Walter, Jr., living quietly with his memories firmly intact in a retirement home in Oregon. Knowing that he was in his late 80's, I flew from Boston within days of that discovery.

During the three days we spent together, Walter and I developed the beginnings of a friendship and he gained enough trust to give me a copy of the three-inch-thick scrapbook his late wife had made of this adventure, and even better, the daily journal he kept during the six weeks he spent in

"Shangri-La."

One thing led to another, and soon I found myself in the Tioga County Historical Society building in Owego, New York, where local historian Emma Sedore had meticulously maintained an archive of materials about hometown gal Margaret Hastings, the female survivor. Sedore provided me with a trove of letters, photos, scrapbooks and—miracle of miracles—a typed copy of the 20,000-word diary Hastings kept in the valley.

Over the months to come, I'd find additional photos, scrapbooks, letters, declassified military documents, and lots more, but at that moment I knew this would be a book.

One quick aside: Not everyone agreed.

When I first began to pursue a contract for "Lost in Shangri-La," I was already committed to write a much different book. It was a good idea for the right person, which wasn't me. As I wrote in the acknowledgments to "Lost in Shangri-La," my daughters could tell from my lack of energy and excitement that I was struggling to drag myself to my computer, a telltale sign

of a terrible fit. Without going into too many uncomfortable details, the idea had come from an editor for whom I have great respect and affection. I asked him if I could switch ideas but was told that his publishing house wasn't interested. Knowing that it would mean an end to a professional relationship I cherished, I held my breath and dove into the new idea.

First, though, I dug into savings and returned the largely spent advance for the never-to-be-written-by-me book (plus my agent's 15 percent fee; I was the one backing out of a contract, not him). Soon after, a second editor I liked also passed on a proposal I wrote for my new idea, which at the time I was calling simply "Shangri-La." I confess to unsightly sweat stains at this point. Then my agent called and told me he had a perfect fit: Claire Wachtel at HarperCollins loved the idea and wanted to make a preemptive offer before it went to auction. In my selective, self-serving memory, I answered

suavely: Tell her to preempt at will and I'll consider it. In fact, I probably slobbered something like, "Oh, thank God, I'm not ruined."

From there, I went happily on what I like to call "my nonfiction scavenger hunt," making long wish lists of people and documents I knew that, if found, would help me tell this story in all its glory. When I make these lists, I know that I won't be able to find everything. In fact, if I ever found everything I was looking for when writing a work of narrative history, I'd know my list wasn't ambitious or audacious enough. By shooting for the moon, I might reach the sky. Knowing in advance that I won't find everything also helps to keep my blood pressure in check.

As a believer in strict nonfiction, in which the work is backed up by exhaustive endnotes—they are my favorite 40 pages of "Lost in Shangri-La"—I have to make peace with the fact that not every question, theory or desire I have will be answered, proved or fulfilled.

Sometimes that will mean leaving out something altogether, while other times it will mean keeping faith with readers by making it unmistakably clear when supposition is all I have to go on.

The way I figure it, as a journalist I long ago accepted that omniscience was the province of novelists. The best I could hope for was a relentless pursuit of the truth and transparency about where I succeeded and where I fell short.

There's a lot more to say about how I approach research and writing books as a journalist-turned-author, but that might risk sounding as though I am giving advice. ■

*Mitchell Zuckoff is a professor of journalism at Boston University and the author of five nonfiction books, including The New York Times best-selling "Lost in Shangri-La: A True Story of Survival, Adventure and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II."*



On his visit to "Shangri-La," Mitchell Zuckoff found wreckage from the plane crash that stranded three members of the American military in a remote valley of Dutch New Guinea. *Photo by Buzz Mavey.*

## On the Road to Writing Books: Blazing New Trails

‘What transforms journalists into nonfiction authors is the heft of their voice, the narrative arc of their idea, and its marketability. These aren’t lessons that tend to be reinforced on the way up the newspaper ladder.’

BY WILLIAM WHEELER

I begin writing this essay in my room in a nearly empty hotel in Tripoli, Libya where I sit trying to ignore the incessant gunfire rattling from every corner of the city. Rebels are shooting anti-aircraft guns into the sky to celebrate the reported capture of one of Muammar el-Qaddafi’s sons. The skyline looks like London in World War II as bright arcs of tracer fire cut across the dark. Occasionally I hear the weirdly silent flutter of bullets falling from the sky, striking glass or brick, even clanging into the spiral staircase of the fire escape outside my window.

I work for low pay, without assurance my work will ever see the light of day, and zero gratitude. I am a freelancer—by choice. When I started in journalism seven years ago I knew I wanted to write nonfiction books, serious and gripping ones about what is happening in the world. My metabolism never felt quite right for the daily news grind. But then a mentor reminded me that journalist/authors like Jon Lee Anderson climbed their way through the ranks of newspapers and magazines, learning the painstaking craft of reporting before they embarked on book-length projects.

So I put in my time at a weekly newspaper in California. In decades past I might have hopped from paper to paper, paper to wire service, befriending the foreign editor and waiting until I could get a position as a foreign correspondent. But this was not then, and with the implosion of the industry’s business model nothing like a career ladder existed any longer. So I went to Columbia University to study journalism and international affairs, and after graduation I set out on the road and started pitching



With political unrest a near constant, the city of Tripoli can be a dangerous place to be a freelance reporter. *Photo by Abdel Magid al-Fergany/The Associated Press.*

magazine pieces.

A friend who is a staff writer at a major national magazine soon recommended that I read a story in the New York Observer about how the well-worn path to writing books is no longer a reliable one to follow. David Hirshey, executive editor of HarperCollins and a former deputy editor of Esquire magazine, was quoted at the beginning of the piece: “Thirty years ago, you worked at a newspaper, you moved to a magazine, and then you wrote books or screenplays,” Hirshey said. “Today you can be a blogger who writes books or you can be a stripper who wins an Academy Award for Best Screenplay.”

I soon learned how hard it was to break into writing for magazines, especially when the global recession hit. Magazines were either dying or paring down their in-house staff to

prevent that fate. This meant former employees were scrambling to find writing work and calling in old favors from friends and colleagues. For a newcomer, it was hard to break in. But with will and desperation, I persevered as I branched out into multimedia, newspapers and finally found a foothold in the magazine world.

Through the years, as a freelancer, I have filed reports from Lebanon, Thailand, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Denmark and Haiti, often with funding from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. I signed on with a book agent with the idea of writing a book about political crises with roots in environmental problems. This concept was not unlike Jared Diamond’s “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,” but mine would be told in real time. For months I worked on writing a book proposal,

focusing chapters on topics such as:

- How the loss of wetlands along the Louisiana coast was making New Orleans more vulnerable to hurricanes
- How a century of greedy irrigation practices in Australia paved the way to more drought-induced firestorms and flash floods
- How a booming population in Egypt had gobbled up all the arable land and the next spike in global grain prices was likely to ignite unrest
- How deforestation in Haiti had exacerbated floods, driving peasant farmers into the shantytowns of slum-infested Port-au-Prince.

Haiti had been plagued in recent years by coups and riots related to the deforestation and flooding. On the heels of four devastating storms and hurricanes in winter 2008, the International Crisis Group warned, “a new natural disaster in 2009 in an overpopulated city such as Port-au-Prince could easily transform the considerable opposition to the [current] administration again into violent conflict.”

We circulated the proposal, and publishers responded by saying that while they liked the idea they felt the marketplace was too crowded with books on environmental subjects. In short, publishers expressed uncertainty about what the final product would be and how it would stand out from what was already in bookstores. Here is a representative sample of the reasons given for passing on my book:

- “This is a Catch-22 for journalists, I realize, but it’s just hard to take the leap, knowing that the narrative will be what distinguishes the book from ‘Collapse’ and all the other eco-crisis books in the works.”
- “This is fascinating ... But I couldn’t get myself to see this as something more than a series of interconnected

magazine articles.”

- “I worried about breaking his narrative out in the crowded environmental category.”

Soon an earthquake in Haiti would kill an estimated 300,000 people, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless amid mounting civil unrest. Oil would gush for 86 days and seep into remaining Gulf Coast wetlands, and biblical floods would ravage Australia. And the surging price of grain would be an instigating factor in the Arab uprisings. Feelings of disappointment turned into dismay as each of these events transpired and I realized that if my book had not been rejected I’d be in these places, weaving the stories



The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was among a string of environmental disasters in 2010. Photo by Gerald Herbert/The Associated Press.

together as my book’s core narrative.

I learned, too, in this process that my early mentor’s advice was wrong. A captivating, well-reported story can be the right place to start out. What transforms journalists into nonfiction authors is the heft of their voice, the narrative arc of their idea, and its marketability. These aren’t lessons

that tend to be reinforced on the way up the newspaper ladder. This also turns out to be a cautionary tale for old newshands trying to make the transition to writing books.

Marketing the idea—and selling you as its author—is everything in getting to write a book. Long gone are the days when an editor can go with her gut, putting trust in a writer’s potential and in her ability to coax out a product that will sell. Now, an editor’s instinct must be confirmed by marketing data. (I’ve heard that major studios use computer formulas to decide which films are marketable enough to produce.) Still, it can be to my advantage that I’m a first-time writer. “You have no numbers,” a journalism professor told me enviously. Since book sales data are so readily available, a writer must sell a lot of books or earn critical acclaim with prior books so as not to suffer diminishing returns on subsequent advances.

A few months ago I had some disheartening conversations with friends as we lamented the writer’s life. I decided to give up on journalism and e-mailed friends declaring that I was leaving the game. The next day a big magazine commission came through, and a few weeks later I got another. While reporting in Libya, I came across yet another story about the covert operations to liberate Tripoli from within, and I sold the idea to Byliner, a start-up Web publisher that sells long-form journalism e-books. [See John Tayman’s story about Byliner on page 38.] So I’m back, trying to find my footing in an evolving marketplace and still trusting that a market will always exist for irresistible ideas and compelling storytelling. ■

*William Wheeler is a freelance journalist. His recent New York Times story about Libya, “After Liberation, Nowhere to Run,” was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.*

# Brief Story, Book Proposal, a Longer Feature, Then a Book

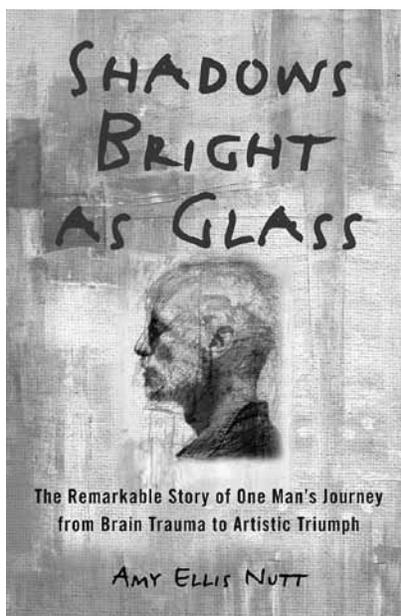
‘... it would be a while before people would say, “Hey, this is a book.”’

BY AMY ELLIS NUTT

There is nothing normal about my journalism career—I landed my first newspaper job at 42—or my book-writing career. In a former long-ago life as a sports reporter, I coauthored a golf book/memoir for a woman on the professional tour and it hit the remainder bin faster than a two-foot gimme hits the bottom of the cup. So after a 13-year hiatus and a move from *Sports Illustrated* to *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, New Jersey—you get the upside-down idea, right?—I had some trepidation about embarking on a second book.

As it does for most newspaper reporters who write books, my unanticipated journey started with an article. Back in 2003 I’d met Jon Sarkin, the subject of “*Shadows Bright as Glass: The Remarkable Story of One Man’s Journey From Brain Trauma to Artistic Triumph*.” Actually, first I met his art. I was in New York City interviewing neurologist Todd Feinberg for a major story I was writing on science’s search for the origin of consciousness. Questions about identity and mind have always interested me and, in fact, prompted me to go to graduate school in philosophy. (It was escaping the PhD dissertation that sent me on my circuitous route to journalism.)

On the wall of Feinberg’s office I noticed a fascinating and colorful picture and asked him about it. The abstract drawing of a series of 1950’s Cadillac tailfins was clever and deeply intriguing. So the doctor then told me the tale of Sarkin, a man who had contacted Feinberg by phone a year earlier after hearing him interviewed on NPR. At the time, Feinberg had just written his first book, “*Altered Egos: How the Brain Creates the Self*,” in which he chronicled his work with



stroke patients who have suffered identity disorders. Sarkin asked Feinberg if he could somehow explain what had happened to him.

In 1988, Sarkin was a successful young chiropractor. On a crisp autumn day in October, he was standing on the eighth tee of a golf course not far from his home in Gloucester, Massachusetts when something shifted inside his brain. The experience wasn’t painful, but it was terrifying and within days Sarkin began experiencing tinnitus, a ringing in the ear. It steadily grew worse, and then every sound became magnified until even the crackling of eggs in a frying pan was enough to send him cowering under the bedcovers. He went to every doctor, every specialist, he could find, including chiropractors, audiologists, psychiatrists and neurologists. The best advice anyone could offer was that he use a white-noise machine. One doctor, however, suggested he might want to try a

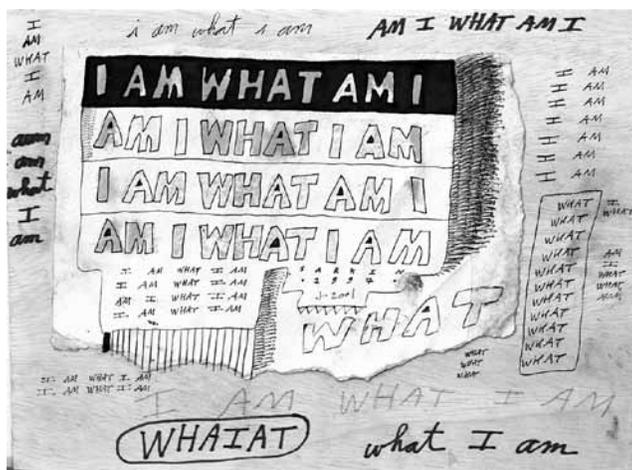
controversial operation with a brain surgeon in Pittsburgh. Sarkin did, but within hours of the operation he suffered a massive stroke.

Weeks later, when he came out of his semi-coma, Sarkin was a different man both physically and psychologically. The greatest change was in his personality. A calm, even shy, serious medical professional was suddenly loud, abrasive and completely uninhibited. Whatever was on his mind came out his mouth. After rehabilitation, when he learned to walk, talk and dress himself again, Sarkin went home. That’s when the drawing started—spontaneously and prodigiously. He drew on magazines, on scraps of paper, on the basement walls, even on his cane. And the more he drew, the more obsessed he became with creating art. Primitive drawings of cartoonish figures eventually became dense, complex art pieces, and he expanded from impulsive drawing to large-scale portraits, collages and even abstract landscapes.

When I learned that Sarkin was a native of New Jersey and was about to have his first major New York City art show at the Diane von Furstenberg Studio, I knew I had to write about him for *The Star-Ledger*. We hit it off, and I wrote what was little more than a biographical sketch for the newspaper’s features section.

## Short Feature to Book Proposal

Sarkin and I kept in touch, and it would be a while before people would say, “Hey, this is a book.” Eventually we realized they were right. But there was a problem. He’d already sold the rights to his life story to Tom Cruise



“What I Am” by Jon Sarkin, whose transformation from mild-mannered chiropractor to frenetic artist Amy Ellis Nutt chronicled in her 2011 book.

and Paula Wagner, then at Paramount Pictures. As it turned out, the book rights were tied in with the film rights and it took close to five years of on-again, off-again efforts to clarify that contract before the green light was given.

Finally, in 2008, when I was writing what would become a 40-page book proposal, I realized so much had happened to Sarkin since I’d first written about him that I should do a longer piece for the newspaper. My editors at The Star-Ledger agreed. So this is how my short feature—after a break of a few years—got transformed into a book proposal, then re-reported as a newspaper series, and finally became a book. By the time the series, “The Accidental Artist,” was published in the paper, I had a book contract from Free Press. For that series, I was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing in 2009. I didn’t win, but being a finalist helped to solidify support at the publisher, a division of Simon & Schuster.

During the next year I worked with a marvelous editor there, Emily Loose. Although I had very little contact with her during the writing itself, she was a terrific hands-on word editor after I handed in the manuscript. I didn’t disagree with a single suggestion. My only disagreement was with the publisher’s marketing department, which didn’t like the title, “The Accidental Artist.”

People would think I was writing about art, they argued. The way I saw things, this is what a subtitle is for. Despite my best efforts (through Loose) to convince them otherwise, my backup, “*Shadows Bright as Glass*,” a line from poet Wallace Stevens, emerged as the book’s title. (Its subtitle is “The Remarkable Story of One Man’s Journey From Brain Trauma to Artistic Triumph.”)

Nearly everyone I asked agreed that “The Accidental Artist” was better.

## Making a Book

The Star-Ledger’s series of stories, which consisted of a number of key scenes from Sarkin’s life, was very different from the book proposal. My book agent, Wendy Strothman, kept urging me to expand the story beyond the tale of one man’s unusual brain trauma. The wider the story’s scope, the larger its prospective audience and the greater the chance would be of selling the book—to the publisher and then to readers.

Easier said than done, and doing this meant thinking differently. How could I connect Sarkin’s experience to a larger theme? What could I contribute—that hadn’t been said already—about this theme? Ideas percolated, as my agent pushed me away from straight biography and tugged me toward telling parallel stories about a man’s search for himself and the story of science’s search for the self.

This became a book I wanted to write, and it seemed like one that wouldn’t be too hard to figure out how to write. I was correct about the first assumption, and way off on the second.

Trying to weave together two divergent strands—the narrative of a man’s life with details of science writing and history about brain research—proved

enormously challenging. In fact, I found nothing was harder than trying to mesh these two stories. When I handed the first draft in to my editor—a month early—I felt pretty good about what I had written, but not great. I’d actually handed in just 50,000 words and would have another 30,000 to write, although I naively didn’t realize it at the time.

Turns out I was about to encounter the hurdles of length and style and voice that lots of reporters-turned-book writers trip over the first time around the track. My editor pointed me toward places where I needed to add or extend scenes. Good advice, relatively easy to execute. Getting my writer’s voice to work well was harder. My reporter’s training had put me in an objective frame of mind so I was using quotes and selecting words in ways that made my book’s storytelling sound stilted and formal.

That needed to be fixed, and once again, my editor offered guidance by reminding me that I had to insert myself more into the book, not as a character, but as an interpreter of events and people. And loosen up as a writer, she counseled me. Be more expansive—even philosophical. This hint turned out to be what I needed to stitch chapters together seamlessly, though not easily. All of this was part of creating a “narrative arc,” the two words that most terrify journalists who decide to become authors.

After thousands of hours and hundreds of pages of drafts, I embraced my fear, even if I still haven’t embraced my book’s title. ■

*Amy Ellis Nutt, a 2005 Nieman Fellow, is a writer with The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. She was awarded the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for her “deeply probing story”—“The Wreck of the Lady Mary”—about the sinking of a commercial fishing boat. On the day the Pulitzers were announced, her book “Shadow Bright as Glass” had just been published and Terry Gross’s interview on “Fresh Air” with her and Jon Sarkin was broadcast that afternoon.*

## Writing a Life, Living a Writer's Life

'At one point, my mother, a woman who is anything but acid, told me: "Get a job, and get a life." She said this out of love and concern because all I ever did—all I ever do—is work, seven days a week, practically every waking hour.'

BY GAIUTRA BAHADUR

“In exile, the only house is that of writing.” Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and critic, conceived that metaphor. I encountered it in a book I was reviewing, and I decided to use the words, translated from German, as a tagline for my website. Full disclosure: except for the nine words that begin this essay, I have never read any Adorno. I hear his prose is difficult. Yet these particular words of his made perfect, intuitive sense to me. I know I can't really compare his exile, that of a Jewish merchant's son from Nazi Germany in the 1930's, to the rootlessness I was feeling at the time. Still, I identified, deeply.

What am I an exile from? I come from an immigrant family, twice over. But immigration is not the same thing as exile. As any Cuban will tell you, exile involves a dream of return to your homeland—one you were forced to leave. It's a matter for debate whether my family *had* to leave Guyana in 1981. I didn't have a say, in any case. I was only 6.

But when I left *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2007, I truly had no choice, being one reporter among many dozens laid off by a new corporate owner. Suddenly I was an exile from a newsroom, part of an early wave replenished many times over as the entire newspaper industry entered crisis mode.

I was among the fortunate few. A few months after my layoff, I was selected as a Nieman Fellow. For a time, this gave me shelter, a nice one as far as shelters go—warm, well stocked, even kind of glamorous, and the companionship of fellow travelers. But like all shelters, it was temporary. As spring arrived, I surveyed the job market, then

decided that instead of re-entering an industry in serious upheaval I would pursue a book project. With half of my Nieman stipend saved, I set off for England to dig in archives for a story I wasn't sure I would find well documented enough to tell.

I wanted to write nonfiction exploring the mystery of my great-grandmother, who left Calcutta, pregnant and without a husband, to work on a Guyanese plantation in 1903. The details of her exit from India, with their hint of trauma or scandal, were not unique. Her story was the story of hundreds of thousands of Indian women who ended up in British colonies worldwide as indentured

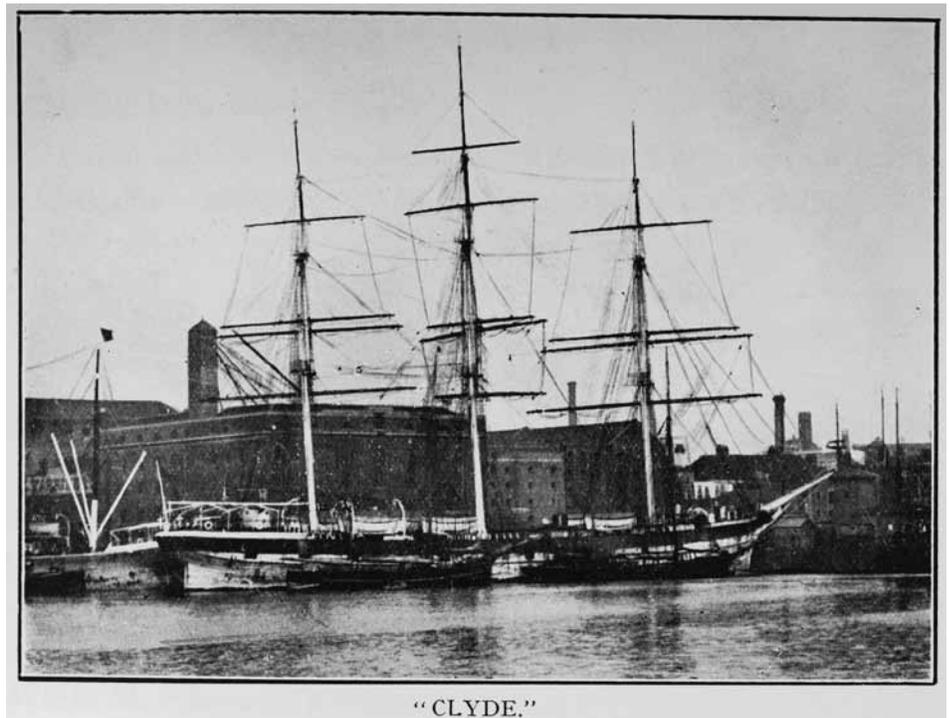
servants, semi-forced laborers who replaced slaves on sugar estates. Talk about exile. These women knew exile.

### Getting Started

The journey I was about to embark on was nowhere close to theirs in daring or sacrifice.

During my Nieman winter break, I had made some forays into the British Colonial Office archives in London and then to India to ensure the story was substantial enough to take a risk. It was. I didn't, however, realize how great the risk would seem to the publishing industry, then facing its own crisis.

It took more than a year for my



Gaiutra Bahadur's great-grandmother sailed to Guyana on this ship called "The Clyde." Photo is from the 1935 book *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailors* by Basil Lubbock.

book proposal to sell. Five editors at five houses liked the proposal well enough to pitch it to acquisition boards. Others said they liked it, but didn't bother to pitch. The consensus seemed to be that the story wasn't commercial enough for anyone to take a chance on during what turned out to be the start of publishing's crisis years. An editor at a major trade house complimented me and the subject matter, saying it was "a story well worth telling, a story well worth hearing." But she concluded: "I'm sad to say I found very few problems with the proposal and the story itself—my only worry is more on our end, how we'd bring this to a big enough audience."

Another rejection letter read:

We ultimately felt that, while an engaging, global and beautifully written memoir, the audience for this would be small and difficult to reach ... We all loved her writing, though ... and would love to see her pursue a bigger story or subject in the future.

When my proposal was on the market in 2009 and 2010, publishing was purging its own employees, enlarging a parallel community of exiles. Established writers and books on more mainstream topics were still being contracted, of course. But there didn't seem to be great room for new voices or for risk—for first-time authors, like me, wanting to take on

"difficult" subjects. I'm not saying that my proposal was perfect or that all rejections were as kind or gently written as the ones I've quoted. I'm saying it cuts to hear that the story of your people is not "big," even when worthy and well written—and it disappoints to hear that "big" seems to mean mainstream and marketable, even to publishers whose mission statements declared otherwise.

This is about when Adorno's words struck such a chord. I had put everything into the pursuit of a story that no one seemed to want. To top it off, the United Kingdom border control office denied me a one-year business visa because, it said, book research didn't constitute a valid business purpose.

## A Year of Reinvention

By Alfredo Corchado

Ours was a year of uncertainty, especially after reverberations from September's economic crash worked their way through the global economy. It was the fall of 2008, and my Nieman year was beginning. As our class came together, we sensed that more newsroom jobs would be evaporating. What was supposed to be our year of retreat, reflection and reinvigoration turned into a time when we kept a close watch on events in the industry as we looked for ways to reinvent ourselves.

Some of us retreated to bars to reflect, of course, while others imagined writing a book as a way to reinvigorate our careers. Some of us combined the two. The idea of writing a book offered an escape, if only temporary. It was a place to turn as we followed our wandering hearts.

Writing books is certainly not a rarity for Nieman Fellows; the bookshelves at Lippmann House are packed with the abundant product of many Nieman authors. Even though

we were not convinced that book publishing was much better off than newspapers, hard times galvanized us to feel a sense of urgency to move in some direction. A new one seemed inviting.

The Nieman Foundation introduced us to excellent writing teachers and mentors—Anne Bernays and Rose Moss for fiction and Constance Hale, who goes by Connie, for nonfiction narrative. I took Connie's class, which by midyear had morphed into a wonderful support group. We went to the spring narrative journalism conference that she put together. She helped us to network as we headed out into the world of agents, authors and publishers.

Now, a few years later, one member



Books written by Nieman Fellows fill—and in some cases more than fill—the shelves at Lippmann House. *Photo by Jonathan Seitz.*

of our writing class has had her book published and at least two others have books in progress, including me. In October, Nieman affiliate Karin Grundberg had her book, "Dying Dandy: A Biography of Art Collector Fredrik Roos," published in Stockholm, Sweden. She remembers the class as being "instrumental for

The officer in Edinburgh who detained me when I tried to enter on a tourist visa instead told me frankly that the meager state of my bank account probably accounted for the rejection. “Plenty of people come here to hole up in nice houses on the Isle of Skye and write,” she said.

By then my Nieman stash was gone. I hadn’t put it into health insurance. I hadn’t put it into the bric-a-brac of a middle-class life: evenings out, eating out. I didn’t even put it into an apartment or a house. Everything I had went into research for the book, mostly at archives in the United Kingdom and the West Indies. I had no lease, no mortgage, no permanent address. I lodged or, once or twice, lucked out

with a housesitting arrangement. I rented rooms cheaply from friends, friends of friends, mothers of friends, and strangers who looked kindly on starving artists, and acquaintances who believed in what I was trying to do. In my year and a half there, I lived in eight different flats in London.

When I wasn’t working on the book, I was working on freelance book reviews or magazine articles or pitches for them or fellowship applications or teaching Saturday morning English classes to 13-year-olds who didn’t want to be there, all to replenish the bank account that the border control lady had found so distressing. At one point, my mother, a woman who is anything but acid, told me: “Get a job, and get

a life.” She said this out of love and concern because all I ever did—all I ever do—is work, seven days a week, practically every waking hour. And who can blame her for thinking that a woman in her mid-30’s should not be living with her parents? Who can blame her for thinking her amply and expensively educated daughter should maybe have a place of her own? Or that she should have the time to do things other than work (like, ahem, get married and procreate something other than a book)?

I’m not sharing the sordid details to make you feel pity. Don’t. I chose this life. It is exactly what I want to do, and on most days I am thrilled to be doing it. I feel blessed. I have

me.” As she wrote to me, “I made friendships that boosted my book idea and gave important and constructive feedback ... Connie gave good homework, such as capturing a person or place.”

Another fellow, Julie Reynolds, was introduced to her book agent at the Nieman conference. Julie had joined our class in the spring when she was in the process of crafting a book about Hispanic gangs, a topic familiar to her because of the crime beat she covered at The Monterey County (Calif.) Herald. The class helped her to “give the thing a narrative shape,” she recalls. She named her book “The Cause,” after “the doctrine the kids believe they’re fighting for,” she told me. She describes her book as a “nonfiction soap opera about their loves and delusions, with this backdrop of crime in rural America.”

She’s written her book, but it has not yet been sold. “Of course the book industry is also going through strange times. Let’s just say timing

is not my strong point,” she added.

Support happened outside of class, too. We were fortunate to have two fearless Argentineans, Nieman Fellow Graciela Mochkofsky and her husband, Gabriel Pasquini, among us. Everyone needs an Argentinean to be pushed to a higher level, and they instilled in us courage and confidence in our ability to take what we knew as journalists and believe we could put to work as authors. Each was a veteran author in Buenos Aires, and with them we created an underground writer’s club, aptly named El Club de los Secretos (“The Secrecy Club”). They introduced some of us to the glamorous, turbulent world of New York agents, editors and publishers.

I considered myself the most unlikely among us to emerge as an author. Yet Penguin Group has me under contract and I am writing my first nonfiction book; the working title is “Midnight in Mexico: The Curse.” In it I try to describe the violence and corruption tearing Mexico apart. It’s

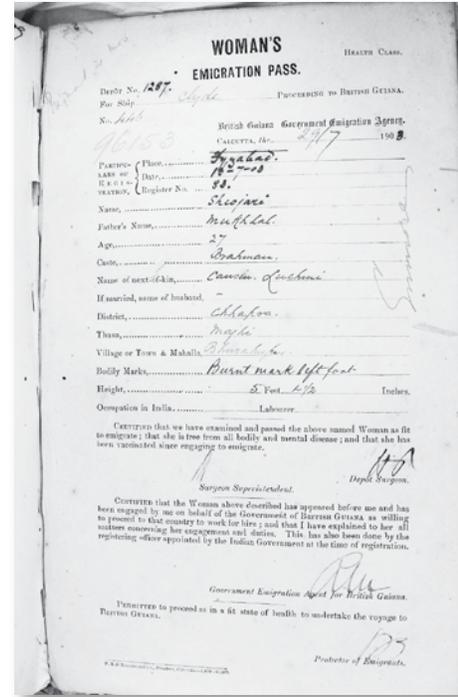
a book that goes beyond tragedy or sensationalism but is an attempt to weave together the search for evil—political and criminal—in Mexico and in the United States with my own search for home and belonging as a Mexican American. To believe in a curse is to believe in the cure.

I find it comforting—and remarkable—that in writing my book I rely on just about the exact outline I developed with help from Connie and my classmates, including Gabriel, Graciela, Karin and Julie. A splendid side benefit of writing this book is recalling the lasting gift we gave each another in the friendship cemented in our writing class—a place where our true reinvention happened. ■

*Alfredo Corchado, a 2009 Nieman Fellow, is bureau chief for The Dallas Morning News based in Mexico City and is completing his book, “Midnight in Mexico: The Curse,” scheduled to be published in late 2012.*



Photographs of indentured laborers imported by sugar plantation owners, as the author's great-grandmother was, were sold as postcards. Photo is from the Michael Goldberg Collection, The Alma Jordan Library, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.



The author began her research with this emigration pass, issued to her great-grandmother, when she went to a Guyanese plantation in 1903. Courtesy of The Walter Rodney Archives, Georgetown, Guyana.

supportive friends and family and colleagues. I have co-publishers I respect and trust: University of Chicago Press and Hurst, an independent press based in London. And somehow I still have enough money to pay for five more months of rent at a writer's studio in Manhattan and subway and train fare to get there.

I'm writing this so you know this is the hardest thing I have ever tried to do. It takes soul-risking hustle and soul-exposing humility, a combination that comes from being rejected repeatedly yet somehow still believing that the ultimate goal is bigger than you or your bruised ego. It takes passion—a downright obsessive love for your subject and belief in its value.

And it takes being blessed. It's not something to undertake just because you think books might be a better bet than newspapers right now.

When I was on staff in a newsroom, I was a workaholic. What I did was who I was. And so I made the mistake of identifying my job with a home country. It wasn't. It's still true to say that what I do is who I am. But now I know that this transcends any particular employer, as compelling as health insurance and a biweekly paycheck can sometimes seem. Writing is not a job. It's a vocation, a calling. If you're lucky, it can be a house, too—the thing that shelters you in seasons of transition and constant address changes. It's not the kind of

house that Google Earth can locate, but I know exactly where to find it. I make words there every day, words that I believe in, words that I hope will make a contribution, words that have a reality well beyond the imaginary homeland of a newsroom. ■

*Gaiutra Bahadur, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, is writing her first book, "Coolie Woman," which is scheduled to be published in 2012. An excerpt appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of The Virginia Quarterly Review and was reprinted in the Indian magazine The Caravan and can be read in full at <http://caravanmagazine.in/Story/1058/Her-Middle-Passage.html>.*

# Starting as a Journalist, Ending as a Memoirist

‘I have come to realize that my obsessive precision—a great virtue in a reporter—wasn’t necessarily the greatest quality in a would-be memoirist.’

BY LUCETTE LAGNADO

I took a leave from *The Wall Street Journal* to work on two family memoirs, but in a way I never left—and the pesky habits, methods, techniques, even the mindset I’d always adopted as an investigative reporter stayed with me. For better and for worse.

My work had made me a stickler for accuracy and precision, with a fear bordering on phobia of making a mistake. Practically speaking, I knew as did my editors that my stories were likely to be read over carefully, with the people I exposed poised to attack, so that I had to be excruciatingly careful. I mastered habits peculiar to the culture of investigative reporting such as “bulletproofing”—as in, “you have to bulletproof your story,” to make sure no one could poke holes in it.

Deadlines were invariably terrifying events, when I walked around the newsroom with a copy of my 2,000-word story, reading it over and over again, afraid I’d gotten so much as a comma wrong. Then, suddenly, here I was with a contract to write a 100,000-word book about my Egyptian-Jewish father who had passed away years earlier, so that I couldn’t even turn to him to verify facts and run by rumors.

I secretly dubbed my book, “100 Years of Levantine Solitude.” And that was in fact my grand ambition—to chronicle what happened to my family over the course of

a century, beginning with my father’s arrival in Cairo from his native Syria as an infant in 1901 to his courtship of my mother in 1940’s Cairo, from my family’s forced exile to America all the way to my parents’ passing in the 1990’s. I was going to document the rise and fall of my family through these decades and, in the process, recreate this vanished world that had haunted me so—a time when and a place where Jews lived peaceably with Muslims and Christians in a magical Arab city called Cairo.



Lucette Lagnado, whose family called her Loulou, with her father.  
*Photo courtesy of Lagnado family archives.*

## Digging for Details

I was sure that all those great habits cultivated as a journalist would help me with my undertaking, and at first they did. I set about my book with the same fervor and diligence that I’d approach my Page One lead stories. I made frantic phone calls and contacted sources around the world and pored through old documents I retrieved by filing the equivalent of Freedom of Information Act requests. Even before formally working on my book,

I’d approached the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) that had resettled us and requested our family files. It took a while but to my amazement, the agency found them—scores of letters documenting our sad efforts to find a home after leaving Egypt. There, in the midst of the thick dossier, was the single most compelling document I’d find about my family: The ledger showing my dad’s payments in \$10 and \$15 increments for our passage to America on the *Queen Mary*.

In approaching this project as a journalist, I thought, why not try for other immigration files? I recalled that another agency called the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), now defunct, had helped in our resettlement, so I demanded our files from there as well. These proved to be even more jarring—especially the pages of case notes from

our old social worker, railing against my dad for being too old-fashioned, too sexist and patriarchal. Between the HIAS and the NYANA papers, I felt I had a sound basis for reconstructing our early days getting out of Egypt and of our emigration to America. Emboldened by the results of my quest, I flew to Paris and retrieved my family dossier from our time as refugees living in a fleabag hotel for nearly a year in the 1960's.

With aspects of our lives that documents didn't cover, I searched for sources, exactly as I would with a story. For chapters on my father as a single man in 1940's Cairo, I flew to Milan and huddled with an elderly cousin who had lived with him before his marriage to my Mom. He vividly remembered watching as my Dad (before he was my dad) went out night after night, not returning till the early dawn. My cousin left it to my imagination to figure out where "the man in the white sharkskin suit"—a description of him that I made the title of my first book—went every night. (Think: Women, bars, casinos, cabarets—the typical Cairo nightlife, once upon a time.) But he also stressed that Dad was always back by dawn—a stickler about attending morning services at the local synagogue, no matter what his nocturnal adventures had been.

I searched for any other relatives or friends who knew my father. Most of them were in their 80's, even their 90's, and that was great, because to my mind the older they were, the greater the chance they would have significant remembrances—assuming their own memory was still intact.

I perfected the art of reported memory. When my own memory failed me, I turned to family members and my older siblings with questions about family incidents. Once again my years as a reporter came to my aid. Indeed, I was so relentless in the way I questioned my older sister that she seemed to dread our encounters and would say



Before leaving Egypt, Leon and Edith had this portrait taken with their 6-year-old daughter Loulou and her brother Isaac. Photo courtesy of César Lagnado, Lagnado family archives.

to me, exactly as a reluctant source would have, "Are you through now?" My oldest brother was a bit more lenient. An accountant by profession, he had a special interest in documenting the past. I found that over the years he had kept an extraordinary array of Dad's papers—cancelled checks going back to the 1980's, business cards from Cairo in the 1950's.

Occasionally it occurred to me to wonder why he had preserved so much. Was he expecting an audit of our father's life? Was that, in effect, what I was doing?

Ultimately, no matter what I did, there were still gaps—areas where reporting basically no longer worked, where I had reached the limits of its usefulness. Even with my trove of documents, my ability to find good sources and persuade them to cooperate, I was missing pieces of the story. Key relatives had died or there remained no written record of what I was seeking. What to do?

### Letting Memories Flow

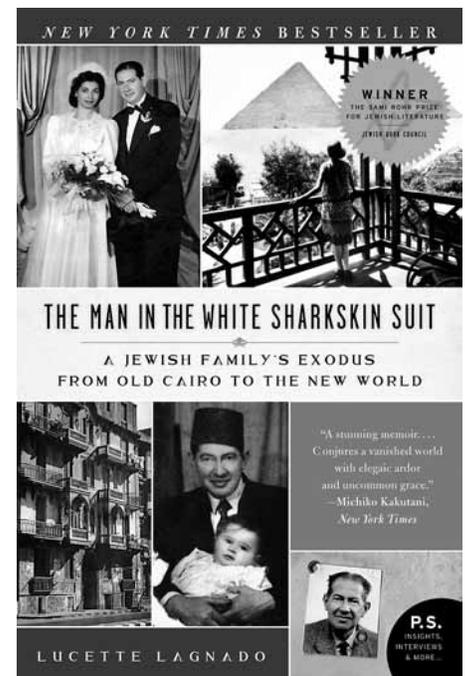
I guess that is when I was forced to learn my new craft—as I transitioned from journalist to memoirist. I had heard, for example, that my father had a dalliance with a legendary Egyptian singer named Om Kalsoum, possibly the greatest Egyptian performer, idolized in the Middle East. It was such a

tantalizing story but how to confirm? Om Kalsoum was long dead, and in terms of the people around her, who on earth could have confirmed that once upon a time an imam's daughter turned chanteuse had a relationship with a tall handsome Jewish man about town who favored white sharkskin suits?

As I weighed what to do, I realized the story was consistent with other stories I'd heard about Dad and rang true. But I owed it to the reader to state explicitly that it was still in the realm of mythology, albeit a myth I happened to believe.

This section remains one of my favorites. I had begun exploring it using traditional reporting, contacting people in Egypt, finding long-lost relatives who might have known about my father and Om Kalsoum. I couldn't really confirm it but rather than adhere to the journalistic law of "if in doubt leave it out," I decided that the mere fact such a story could have circulated about my dad revealed worlds about his character and reputation.

The greatest impediment of all to these memoirs turned out to be me—my



own memory, the memory of someone who had left Egypt as a small child. At the tender age of 6, I had become a refugee and undertaken a journey most adults would find daunting, from Egypt to France to America. My memories of that period were nothing like those of my siblings; they were a little girl's memories, marked by the longings of a child who suddenly finds herself having lost all that she treasures—her school, her home, her street, her cat, her favorite patisserie where her dad takes her as a treat each afternoon.

They were hardly enough to turn into a memoir of a lost Egypt, and I was at a loss as to what to do until I remembered a cardinal rule I'd learned at the Journal—what we dubbed “jiu jitsu.” That was the art of turning a weakness into strength, to transform even a flaw in a story into an asset. That is when I realized that I had to tell the story—this seemingly adult memoir of exile and loss—in the voice and through the eyes of a child, of the little girl me, a girl named Loulou, who watches bewildered as her world changes because of massive political and social altercations. Loulou doesn't understand the politics—she has no sense that a revolution has taken place in Egypt and that the

country is now under a military dictatorship that doesn't want Jews or foreigners. But she does feel—intensely—the events around her. She simply experiences them under her terms.

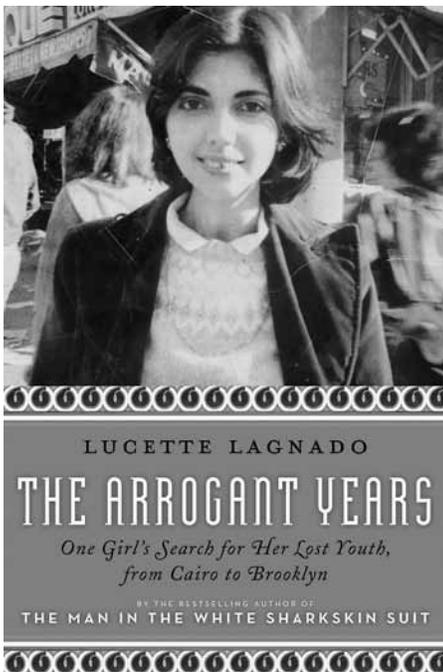
Suddenly my undertaking made perfect sense. No, I wouldn't be able to write a memoir about the fall of King Farouk and the rise of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, but I would be able to tell the story of an elegant Swiss patisserie named Groppi's where I—or young Loulou, rather—loved to go and sit in a pebbled garden and spoon out freshly-made chantilly crème. I would be able to recall once upon a time attending a French lycée in the heart of Cairo and wearing a dashing uniform with a crest. I would conjure up my home, and my little cat Pouspous who I loved above all others, and turn her into a major character. And of course I would write about my home, but in the way that I had known it—as large and graceful, with balconies facing both a boulevard and an alleyway, and the constant vendors stopped by selling marvelous treats: fresh figs, apricots, fish, and occasionally, baskets of rose petals my Mom used to make rose petal jam.

The memories flowed, as did the emotions, and if I needed to “fact check,” well, I would turn to an older sibling and run some incident by them.

I have come to realize that my obsessive precision—a great virtue in a reporter—wasn't necessarily the greatest quality in a would-be memoirist. Imagination, the ability to recall and bring to life lost people and lost worlds, are far more valuable. Yet I suppose that my reporter's mindset



Lucette Lagnado, whose family called her Loulou, with her mother at the beach in Brooklyn in 1968. Photo courtesy of Lagnado family archives.



ultimately served me well. I took less poetic license, I believe, than some of my fellow memoirists and became a true believer in the power and potential of reported memory. ■

*Lucette Lagnado is the author of two memoirs about her Egyptian-Jewish family, “The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family’s Exodus From Old Cairo to the New World,” published by Ecco in 2007, and more recently, with the same publisher, “The Arrogant Years: One Girl’s Search for Her Lost Youth, From Cairo to Brooklyn.” She is a reporter at The Wall Street Journal.*

## Journalists and Memoir: Reporting + Memory

‘The story must move beyond a verbal regurgitation of hastily recalled anecdotes. You need to report live from your life, researching with interviews, data and documents that support your recollections.’

BY MICHELE WELDON

“Professor Weldon, I had no idea you had a past.”

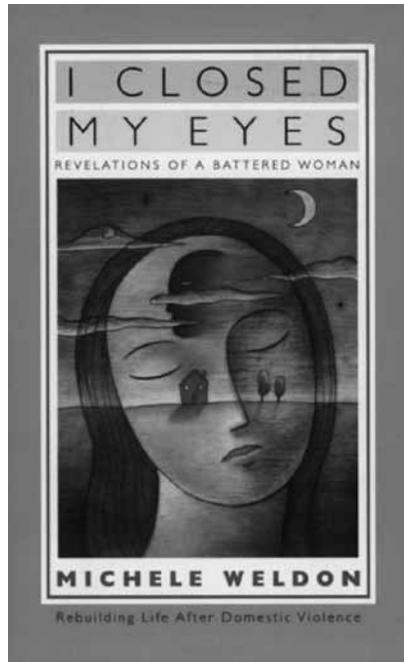
A student I had taught in a freshman journalism skills class at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University stopped me on the first floor of Fisk Hall on my way to give a lecture. The look on her face was parked between astonishment and curiosity. It was a few days after I appeared as a guest on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” in October 2002, speaking about my first book, “I Closed My Eyes: Revelations of a Battered Woman.”

“Yes, I do,” I answered. “When you get to be my age, everyone has a past.”

Of all the millions of words I have written as a journalist for newspapers, magazines, websites and radio in the past three decades, the memoir about my marriage to a cyclically violent attorney and the difficulty of raising three sons in the aftermath of domestic violence is what I am most proud of personally and professionally. That is not to imply it was easy.

It felt risky as a journalist to spell out the secrets of my own life, to stand in front of my peers, editors, administrators, students and readers without pretense or shame, to invite the collision of the professional and personal. But I felt it important to honestly dispel the myth that such an aberration does not happen to women like me who are successful, confident, intelligent and have no history of abuse.

The point of the memoir, as it is for most memoirists, is to artfully illuminate a corner of the world to empower and educate others. My motivation to write the memoir in stolen moments while teaching and working as a freelance contributing columnist



to the Chicago Tribune was because I felt foolish and hypocritical telling other people’s stories as a journalist every week when I was afraid—and embarrassed—to tell my own.

The drive to authentically articulate the truth was more powerful than I could have imagined. It is a force many journalists experience.

### The Inside Scoop

Journalists penning compelling memoirs is not new; but what is new is the growth of the genre and the evolution into several subsets of memoir. This is a recent splintering beyond what I call the “career rearview mirror” tome of the past that can involve namedropping and exotic locales peppered with peeks behind the scenes and insights into the profession.

Still, the career memoir is a frequent entrée in the buffet. Soledad O’Brien’s “The Next Big Story: My Journey Through the Land of Possibilities,” published last year, charts her course from childhood to the CNN anchor desk. Ron Nessen’s recent release, “Making the News, Taking the News: From NBC to the Ford White House,” is also a career overview. Each is a collection of anecdotes and eyewitness revelations, career highs and lows, more of a narrative version of their Wikipedia entries than a salacious glimpse into a fascinating, fast life



“Career Rearview Mirror” memoirs

many of us will never know or the train wreck celebrity memoirs oozing out from the coasts.

This Google Earth approach to journalist memoir is only one take on the genre. In it, the journalist stars as main character in a historical narrative, chronicling a timeline that can offer revelations about the process of reporting, if not always about the inner mechanics of a contemplative life.

Another approach, or the “how I came to be” memoir by journalists, has traction because it can serve as a mentoring guide as well as bridge the personal to the universal with well-written discoveries about self-purpose before the onset of journalistic fame. USA Today columnist and ABC and NPR commentator Christine Brennan’s “Best Seat in the House: A Father, a Daughter, a Journey Through Sports,” from 2006, is a sentimental and intelligent ode to her family, particularly her father, and how his encouragement led her to a career in sports journalism. Quite recent is former Newsweek editor Mark Whitaker’s “My Long Trip Home: A Family Memoir,” which tells the complicated story of his parents’ interracial marriage and its effects on his life. Earlier this year Michele Norris, cohost of NPR’s “All Things

when you didn’t want to be part of the story. With all the social media—Twitter, Facebook and everything being about me, me, me—it’s now such a personality-driven journalistic world.”

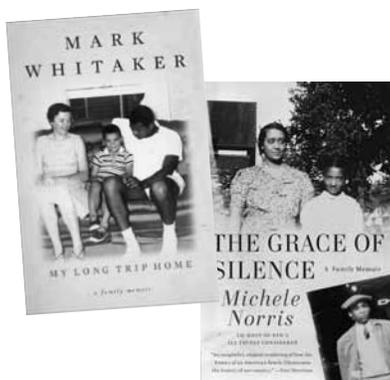
### Objective Journalism vs. Subjective Memoir

It is that traditional imagined wall between the objective and the subjective in journalism that appears now to be eroding, if not crumbling, thanks in part to blogs and social media. Perhaps this is smoothing the path for more journalists to attempt memoir. With the advent of more narrative approaches in everyday news reporting, the genre of memoir is not seen as so daring a leap for a journalist to take. Stylistically it is not so difficult to imagine expanding the narrative muscle into a personal book.

For many journalists, their creative nonfiction career has regularly delivered large doses of personal observations and insertions of self. And for those writers who recount phases of their lives in what I call “delicious slices,” one memoir is not necessarily enough. Joan Didion recently wrote “Blue Nights,” about the death of her daughter, Quintana. The book cover even mimics the tone and look of her 2005 book, “The Year of Magical Thinking,” her memoir about the period following her husband’s death. With Didion, writing is the leading character, raw, vulnerable and simultaneously polished and deliberate, shining in its timelessness and originality.

Some iconic journalists inspire

curiosity about their lives because of their suffering or triumph over illness, catastrophe and misfortune. Roger Ebert’s new “Life Itself: A Memoir” promises to deliver the characteristic witticisms of a movie reviewer cult hero, who literally lost his audible voice, only to sharpen his written one. In a category of memoir I call “in sickness and in health,” Hoda Kotb contributed her 2010 book, “Hoda: How I Survived War Zones, Bad Hair, Cancer, and Kathie Lee,” an irreverent work from an irreverent broadcast journalist.

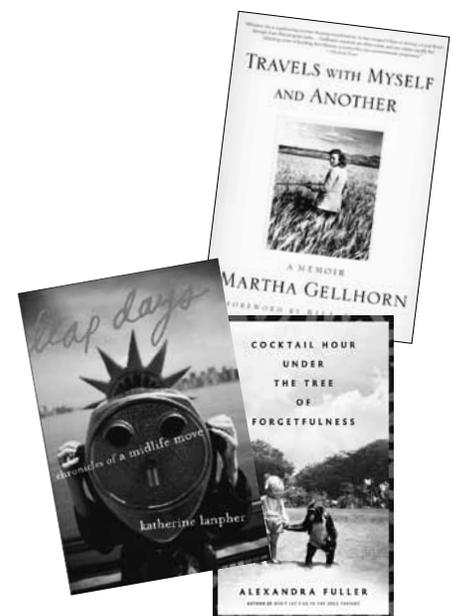


“How I Came to Be” memoirs

Considered,” released “The Grace of Silence: A Family Memoir” about her upbringing.

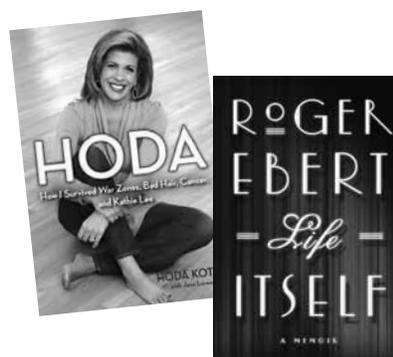
With compelling writing and reportorial skill, these memoirs highlight personal growth and transformation, the unseen sides of public personas who tell the truth about current events for a living.

Brennan, an author of six other books, worked for 15 years as a reporter for The Miami Herald and The Washington Post before she became a national columnist in 1997. “I was more prepared to write a memoir as a columnist than I ever would have been as a reporter,” she said, adding, “It’s quaint now to think about the days



“Far Away” memoirs

The “far away” memoir is one that travel writers and journalists living abroad or on voluntary or imposed sabbatical render, including the classic from Martha Gellhorn, “Travels With Myself and Another: A Memoir,” originally published in 1978. Magazine journalist Alexandra Fuller, who grew up in Africa, recently released a second memoir, “Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness,” a prequel to her 2001 memoir, “Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood.” These memoirs offer setting as character and the author on a journey of discovery driven by place. Print and broadcast journalist Katherine Lanpher took the



“In Sickness and in Health” memoirs

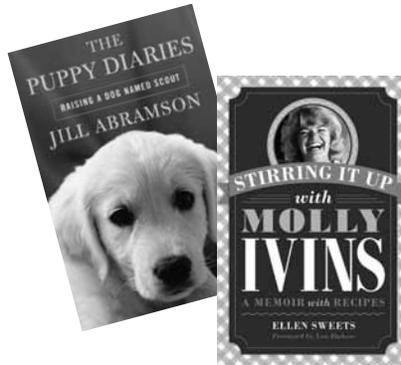
backdrop of a move to New York as a driving force in her 2006 memoir, “Leap Days: Chronicles of a Midlife Move,” proving that for a Minnesota-based journalist even Manhattan can be a far journey.

Chicago journalist Maureen Jenkins who has spent two decades writing for newspapers including The Oregonian, The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer, The Arizona Republic, Chicago Sun-Times, and Chicago Tribune, is eager to begin work on such a memoir when she moves later this year to Samois-sur-Seine, a small village 40 miles south of Paris, for one year. To begin to feel comfortable with the more personal voice required for memoir, Jenkins began blogging. Still, she understands the price of naming her personal voice.

“Everything you put your name on you have to be comfortable standing behind whether it is a tweet, a Facebook entry, or a memoir,” Jenkins said. “At some point you will want to write objective journalism again and

it may be difficult for you to be seen as a credible journalist.”

In an era of sophisticated blogs that can support early musings and drafts that can later be formed into



“Out of Left Field” memoirs

a memoir, journalists can heed the caveat that no matter where the content appears, it must be truthful and able to withstand scrutiny. As some mem-

oirists move to self-publishing and go straight to Kindle or Nook, bypassing the gatekeeping editor of publishing houses, the safety net of copy editors and fact checkers is removed (and at some publishing houses, line editing doesn't happen anymore anyway).

Any journalist hoping to write a memoir needs to pause before posting personal content since what is written now—and appearing anywhere—can definitely have an impact on a career. Some new memoirs by journalists have little to do with their professional lives. From the first female executive editor of The New York Times, Jill Abramson, comes her 2011 book, “The Puppy Diaries: Raising a Dog Named Scout,” about her golden retriever's first year. This “out of left field” memoir may say more in what it does not say, while revealing an arena of a famous journalist's life completely unrelated to the work. Ellen Sweets, a journalist and longtime friend of the irascible and irreverent Molly Ivins, this year

## Tips for Journalists Writing Memoirs

*Several journalists have participated in Michele Weldon's Writing to Save Your Life memoir writing workshops during the past decade. While she finds that journalists are at an advantage because of their writing and reporting skills, there are still some caveats when the task involves making the transition from objective reporting to personal narrative. Here, she shares some advice:*

1. Be sure that you can back up with a document every claim, anecdote or scene involving another person named or unnamed in your book. Consult a libel attorney or intellectual property specialist for advice. The truth is a defense,

and often not naming someone can help you avoid litigation. Your story must be true, and you must be able to prove it.

2. Be sure your motivation is not vengeance. Take the high road, write about yourself and your life, omitting pieces that could harm anyone else's life or could be seen as malicious.
3. Move beyond chronology and a linear retelling of events. Choose the portion of your life to highlight that will yield a captivating story. Realistically, all and every part of your life is not the best reading. You do not have to tell your story

from birth to the present. You can start in the middle and tell it with flashbacks and scenes or start now and work backward.

4. Create scenes in each chapter, making sure there is a dramatic arc to the story. After years of writing articles and columns, it is difficult at first to write a chapter that is only a piece of the story to be continued. Resist the urge to have every chapter be its own entity. Each chapter builds up to what will follow.
5. Introduce characters who will be developed fully in your narrative and will have some transforma-



“Bang Bang” memoirs

released “Stirring It Up With Molly Ivins: A Memoir With Recipes,” a cookbook/memoir serving up friendship as well as recipes.

The category of what some others call “bang bang” memoirs is becoming more and more crowded as correspondents and freelance journalists filing from conflict zones around the world return home. “The Woman Who Fell From the Sky: An American Journalist

in Yemen,” a 2010 book by Jennifer Steil, included stories of a love affair as well as her year running a Yemeni English-language newspaper. Stories of culture clash, courage and daring also populate the 2010 book by Fred Minnick, “Camera Boy: An Army Journalist’s War in Iraq.”

No matter what category a journalist’s memoir falls into, accuracy must be maintained, along with faithfulness to the reporting and depiction of a life in toto or a slice of life that is truthful. The urge to write a personal story cannot eclipse the need to report fully. As I remind my students at Medill and also in my Writing to Save Your Life memoir workshops around the country, memory cannot be the only thing you rely on to produce memoir. The story must move beyond a verbal regurgitation of hastily recalled anecdotes. You need to report live from your life, researching with interviews, data and documents that support your recollections.

Without the dutiful pursuit of facts and a clear, deliberate attempt to decipher some meaning from the acts, events and occurrences with introspection and context, what results is simply a collection of dusty anecdotes from the past. And that is a work that is no more interesting or artful than a grocery list found in a pocket of an old raincoat. ■

*Michele Weldon is an assistant professor of journalism at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, the author of three books, and a journalist for more than 30 years. She is a seminar leader and mentor/editor for The OpEd Project and recently completed a second memoir, “Escape Points,” about raising three sons, their high school wrestling careers, and her recovery from cancer.*

- tion or impact on your story. You may leave some people out, remembering that the reader will have to carry every person and every scene you write about, as if lugging a backpack up a mountain. You want to be sure the reader is doing all that heavy lifting for a reason.
6. Omit anything that will ruin your career. Salacious items about sex, drugs, illegal activity, and rock ‘n’ roll may land you on the talk shows, but may bar you from future employment or may hinder your credibility. Don’t be mean to be funny, and just don’t be mean.
  7. Once released from the constraints of word counts, you may find yourself overwriting. Resist the urge to go on and on to describe each morsel as if it is a priceless artifact. Make sure there is an immediacy and urgency to the writing and that you shift the focus of your story from up-close to medium shots to context and overview. No one wants to read a book of your rantings.
  8. Answer the question: What does this mean to the reader? It cannot simply be you telling your story to make yourself feel better. How will readers connect? As cautionary tale? Inspirational story? Are you a role model? Is the story a peek into an undiscovered world? Is this an exposure or glimpse into an elite life others have no access to?
  9. Join a writing group for feedback, hire a book doctor, partner with an agent, then an editor who loves you. Make sure every word, every sentence, every paragraph, every page is your absolute best work and perfectly articulates your intent.
  10. Invite me to the book signing. ■

# Newsroom to Classroom: Books as a Thread of Connection

With a forthcoming book about undercover reporting—along with a reporter-friendly database of historic examples—a j-school professor keeps her focus on familiar topics.

BY BROOKE KROEGER

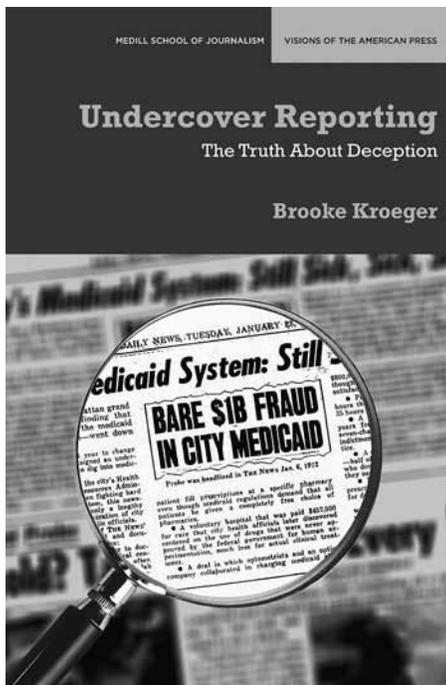
Too often, journalists draw blanks when they are asked in faculty search interviews to expound on their big ideas. Had I still been in the hurricane of daily journalism when I interviewed for a full-time academic position, I might have done the same. As things turned out, when I answered an advertisement on a lark in 1998, I had the distinct but unplanned advantage of having left a newsroom a full decade earlier. By then, my biography about the adventurous, undercover

journalist Nellie Bly had been in print for four years and I had just submitted the manuscript for a biography of the American novelist Fannie Hurst. The books certainly helped me get the job.

Teaching at New York University (NYU) turned out to be just as rewarding as I had hoped, but it quickly became clear that the center panel of the academic triptych—alongside teaching and service—is scholarship. So a new book got under way. “Passing: When People Can’t Be Who

They Are” explores why people of good purpose would falsify the way they present themselves to others. My fourth book comes out in 2012. “Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception” argues in favor of the controversial journalistic practice in its title.

In a deep bow to our digital times, the book has a companion—a free online database created in partnership with NYU’s Elmer Holmes Bobst Library. Together they exhume from



Brooke Kroeger’s upcoming book is about undercover journalism done in the public interest, and a Chicago Daily Times madhouse exposé is part of a free online database that she created and will launch with her book’s publication.

the microfilm burial ground nearly 200 years worth of great but forgotten high-impact undercover journalism committed in the public interest. My hope—and intent—is to broaden the database beyond its clear U.S.-bias once it goes live at <http://undercoverreporting.org> with the book’s publication in 2012.

I admire the many journalists who manage to research and write books while doing stories on constant deadline in someone else’s keep. But I could never have carved out the space to do books that way. The 12 years I spent being wire service crazy—four years in Chicago, eight in the maelstrom of foreign bureaus—and then two more years at a daily newspaper in New York City took all the energy and focus I had, especially given the competition from a family at home. No doubt becoming a freelancer made the two biographies possible, shielded by commercial advances and the largesse of a husband willing to let me sate a desire that took hold as I headed into my 40’s.

### Book Boosters

The university has been just as magnanimous a patron but a far more exacting one. Teaching allows tighter control over time than daily journalism does, but student needs are too consuming ever to be treated as a sideshow. It took only one three-hour-and-forty-minute class for me to grasp that teaching has an unexpectedly exhausting performance dimension, too.

No complaint, however. In the university, the onus to produce new knowledge is not a thing apart; it’s built into the brief. During the years I was researching and writing “Passing,” the terms of my full-time university appointment also provided three 12-week summer breaks and three five-week winter breaks. In the scope of my book writing time, this was a virtual year.

“Undercover” also took nearly four years to complete but under more encumbered circumstances. In 2005, I became chairwoman of NYU’s school-

sized Department of Journalism and then, in 2008, founding director of its Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, which are effectively the same entity. Given the demands that the tumult in our industry have brought on j-schools in these years, let’s just say it’s been a wire service crazy time. I also continued to teach—one course a term instead of two—and created the graduate Global and Joint Program Studies, which I also direct. Gone were those coveted vacation breaks.

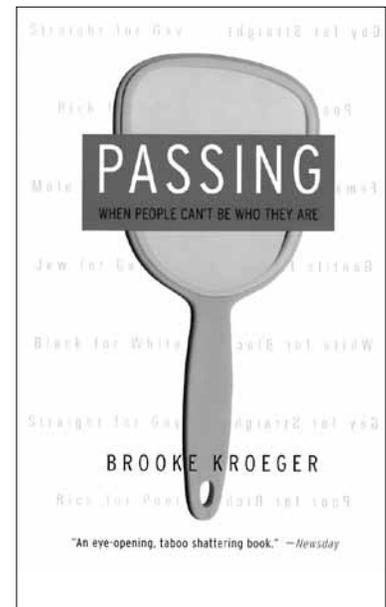
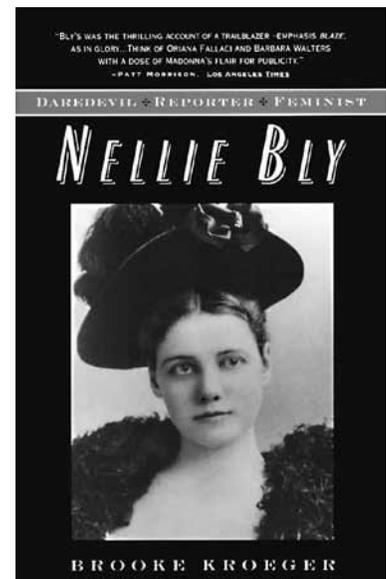
Looking back, I know that a major spur to finishing my last book with so much else going on was the shame I felt, as any self-respecting tenured professor should, for not having managed to write for publication during my first two years as chair.

Luckily, I happened on two great expeditors. One was the sudden surge in the online availability of documentary material. In the years between the publication of “Passing” and the start of research for “Undercover Reporting,” dozens, but by no means all, of the documents I needed became available and searchable online, arriving free or through subscription-based digital repositories, many of which NYU provides through Bobst, which is another huge research advantage of academic affiliation. Even more material now comes glitch-free, in ways it formerly did not, as e-mail attachments, either as a courtesy from individuals with personal archives or via the precious services of interlibrary loan.

In fact, I retrieved much of the primary material that undergirds “Undercover Reporting”—works of journalism in every medium going as far back as 1822—in pajamas. The other big helper was when I figured out that waking up at 4 a.m. turns one workday into two.

### Body of Work

One of the things the tenure and promotion process does is oblige professors to articulate the cohesion in their body of work. My first two books made this easy. The research I had done for Bly (1864-1922) had actually led me to Hurst (1885-1968),



an ideal chronological successor. In the overlapping lives of these two extraordinary but largely forgotten women writers, I began to ferret out why a highly redundant women's movement came into being in the 1960's when so much of this same feminist ground—the lives of women entering the workforce in Bly's day were pure testament—already had been trod between 1880 and 1920. In figuring out what caused the amnesia and then the re-run, Hurst's life, work and social circles provided persuasive clues.

The connective tissue of the two books I've written while teaching journalism—"Passing" and "Undercover Reporting"—is the exploration

of how deception can be used for good purpose. Yet I had to ask myself whether these two books cohere with the earlier ones in some vast, incisive scholarly plan. Although I didn't consciously plan it, they do.

The thread I pulled from Hurst was her classic 1933 women's weeper, "Imitation of Life," the ultimate black passing for white melodrama, which was the inspiration for wondering if people still had cause to "pass" 70 years later, and if it was or was not a bad thing. And who better than the iconoclastic Bly to summon the larger questions inspired by the potency and pitfalls of the passing that is at the heart of reporting undercover?

The only big change for me this time is that the publisher and the premise are academic like, gulp, me. The journalist, however, still rules. The book is jargon-free. ■

*Brooke Kroeger, a professor at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, served as chair of the Department of Journalism from 2005 to 2011. She is the author of four nonfiction books, including "Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception," to be published by Northwestern University Press in 2012. Her website is <http://brookekroeger.com>.*

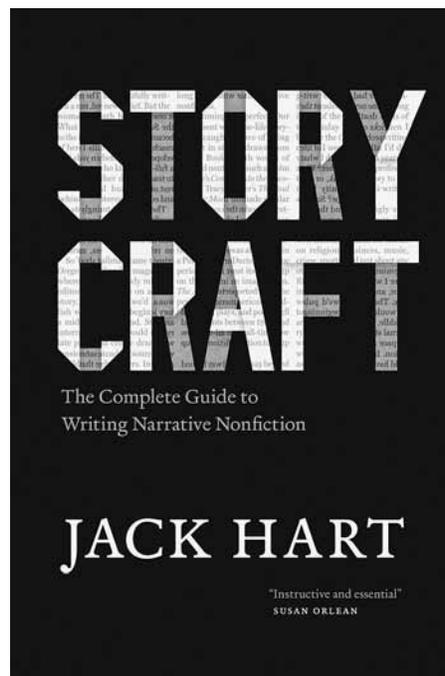
## Narrative Writing: Craft to Ethics, Theme to Characters

In 'Storycraft' Jack Hart 'reveals the story behind the stories.'

BY BETH MACY

I stumbled upon Jack Hart's new narrative writing guide at the same time I was preparing to return to the classroom for the first time in seven years. I was also two months into reporting a 130-inch narrative, about a troubled Iraq War veteran who committed "suicide by cop," for a newspaper series on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Though I haven't written a book—and don't have one under way—Hart's hints about writing stories seem as apt to that longer endeavor as they are to my present-day ones.

For me, his book's appearance was fruitful timing, not unlike finding a new recipe the morning of a dinner party and realizing all the ingredients are in your pantry. Hart's "Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction" fortified me. It underscored lessons I thought I'd already mastered,



prompting me to think deeper—and talk to my editors more—about the importance of theme.

In his introduction, Hart promises "help, not literary hairsplitting." Retired from his job as The Oregonian's long-time narrative writing guru, he shares behind-the-scenes stories accrued from his career working with Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters. He seems to have dissected every important narrative written in the past century and sat in on every major writing conference.

All of my journalism action heroes are present, spouting some of my favorite journalism-isms. There is Bill Blundell, telling me to digress often but not for too long; Tom Wolfe with his status details; Anton Chekhov with the rifle that better damn well fire; and Jon Franklin with his formula that cliché + theme = universal truth. Elmore Leonard sets the bar for juicy,

page-turning prose by declaring that we should “leave out the parts that people skip.” But when to digress and what exactly to skip?

Hart takes the long view, citing an astonishing breadth of examples—plays, radio stories, screenplays, non-fiction books, and copious newspaper articles spanning an array of length, subject and style. He quotes from Aristotle to Ira Glass, from Michel de Montaigne to John McPhee. He sits at the feet of the masters, giving you Jim Collins’s advice on mapping a narrative arc and Nora Ephron’s on divining theme (“All storytelling is a Rorschach”).

But Hart’s passion shines brightest, and his writing flows the most seamlessly when he reveals the story behind the stories he personally edited. He describes the elements of short-story narrative by deconstructing classical music critic David Stabler’s tale of what happened when an injured pianist couldn’t perform Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto and a last-minute fill-in was flown in to replace him, nailing a thrilling standing ovation performance.

He takes readers behind the scenes of an explanatory narrative by Richard Read that follows the course of a potato from a farm in Moses Lake, Washington to a serving of French fries at a Singapore McDonald’s—by way of some rioting Indonesians and Chinese farmers. The Pulitzer Prize-winning story explains the impact of globalization with entertaining and painstakingly crafted story lines that show how increasingly entwined our global economy is. Hart describes the French fry saga—an example of meta-journalism at its finest—in ways that cleverly demonstrate his own explanatory narrative formula of alternating scenes and digressions.

The graduate students in my literary journalism course span a wide range of experience, from a published

essayist to a radio reporter to a plastic surgeon who earns more than the rest of us combined yet still longs to see his name in print. (He’d read all the books before class began.) They appreciate Hart’s friendly, avuncular tone and have absorbed many of his feature-writing tenets, such as to avoid linking verbs and passive construction.

I imagine Hart’s book, like Jon Franklin’s “Writing for Story,” will be one they will turn to repeatedly in their writing lives, absorbing its more advanced lessons as their experiences

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**Though I haven’t written a book—and don’t have one under way—Hart’s hints about writing stories seem as apt to that longer endeavor as they are to my present-day ones.**

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progress. I know I learn something new each time I reread Franklin’s how-to narrative-writing tome.

### Reporting Ethics

From The New Yorker stories of Atul Gawande to Tracy Kidder’s “Mountains Beyond Mountains,” Hart’s bibliography is an exemplary required reading list for both the beginning and seasoned practitioner. His final chapter on ethics raises interesting real-life conundrums. He seems to agree with Read’s decision not to sort pills at the request of an overwhelmed medical team he was covering following the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, arguing that the reporter’s job is to document his subject’s work without altering the reality.

The altering-reality rule isn’t one I abide by, my litmus test being: If it’s life or death, being a person comes first. Having covered the recent cholera outbreak in Haiti, I found myself sorting pills and fetching supplies in my down time. To do less also would have altered the reality; after all, I

reasoned, the team would have seen me as a jerk.

I once asked The New Yorker’s Jon Lee Anderson to explain why he had helped a post-earthquake subject in Haiti find food: “Journalistic mistakes are not as important as moral and ethical mistakes,” he said. “It’s not about how I feel about myself or some code that was enacted in a hallowed chamber.” Complicated, messy stories should leave readers and reporters feeling ragged, sore and raw because that’s the way life is, he told me.

“Everybody should feel a little bad afterwards.”

If I have one quibble about “Storycraft,” it’s that Hart doesn’t delve into the emotional toll that intimate journalism exacts from reporters who often straddle and occasionally cross those slippery, ethical lines. One of my students confessed that her first story profile subject—a

transgendered veteran struggling with PTSD and her own felony-riddled past—got under her skin so badly that she couldn’t sleep the night after her first interview.

Spotlighting more examples from women journalists—featured only about one quarter as often as the men are in this book—might have offered different insights into the emotional landscape, and fresh narratives also would have been instructive as well as a few more examples of stories that tried but failed.

These are minor complaints, though, given how much “Storycraft” *does* have to teach veteran and newbie reporters alike about the craft of writing. And this is bound to serve us well, whether our assignment is due tomorrow—or in two years. ■

*Beth Macy, a 2010 Nieman Fellow, is the family beat reporter for The Roanoke (Va.) Times and teaches literary journalism to graduate students at Hollins University.*

# A Literary Exploration of How Power Corrupts

This story is ‘about how the worlds of journalism and fiction writing are not as unimaginably different as one might think.’

BY THRITY UMRIGAR

I published my first novel in 2001, a year after I completed my Nieman fellowship. In fact, I wrote the novel, “Bombay Time,” during my time at Harvard. To be honest, I applied for the fellowship in part because I was hoping it would allow me time to write my book. And write it I did, even when it meant waking up at 4:30 on cold Cambridge mornings so that I could write for a few hours before starting my day as a Nieman Fellow.

But to start at the beginning: Once upon a time, not too long ago, there lived a journalist who wanted to be a novelist.

After almost 15 years of reporting on other people’s words, thoughts and ideas, of never revealing her own opinions, feelings or beliefs, the journalist was ready to explore the interior life—to express what she believed and felt and held sacred. To tell the stories that she wanted to tell, and not the ones her editors thought were newsworthy.

And so, in 1999, I applied for and was awarded a Nieman fellowship. My apartment in Cambridge was so cold I wore light leather gloves while I typed on the HP desktop I had lugged all the way from Ohio. The ridiculous good luck that had gotten me the fellowship in the first place lingered by my side a little longer, and I found an agent and then a publisher while I was still at Harvard. Some of this stuff you can’t make up.

But that’s not what this story is about. It’s about how the worlds of journalism and fiction writing are not as unimaginably different as one might think. About how, in the end, there are only two kinds of writing—good writing and the mediocre kind. The transition from one genre to another is not as difficult as some people think.



When I was a reporter, the artificial hierarchy that people drew between journalism and literature used to make me mad. Talk about journalism being a poor cousin to literature made me bristle. In order to blur these artificial lines, I tried to infuse my journalism articles with as much literary flavor as I could get away with. Years before someone coined the term “narrative journalism,” I was drawn to longer, magazine-length stories—stories about human beings, not sources; stories that could be told with nuance and complexity, that illuminated something about the way we lived; stories that had “interiority.”

It turned out to be wonderful practice for my current career as a novelist. First of all, journalism imposed a certain discipline, a work ethic, a workmanlike attitude toward making art, which I appreciated. There is nothing precious or coy or airy-fairy about journalism. With modesty, it bills itself as a craft and not as art. I try to bring that same muscular, proletarian attitude toward novel writing—it’s my job, it’s my calling, I try to do it

as well as I know how. Saying this in no way diminishes the mystical, subconscious, almost sacred aspect of storytelling, those days when you can hear the angels singing to you and through you. But when I catch myself sounding pretentious about what I do for a living, when I hear myself use terms like “narrative structure,” “story arc,” and “archetypal characters” too often, I remind myself—all I do all day is spin yarns. The drunk at the bar down the street from my house probably does it better. Better yet, I imagine my former colleagues in the newsroom rolling their eyes at me. It works like a charm every time.

I believe that every life has a theme. When I was 6 years old, I began to write poems. These poems were usually addressed to my parents and took on the aggrieved tone of a child who had been refused something. It was my way of taking on the power structure, of trying to right a perceived injustice. Years later, my journalism took a similar path—whether I was writing about homelessness or AIDS or class and gender disparities, I was

actually writing about power—who in our society has it, how it is used against those who don't, and what the strategies of resistance are.

My novels have similar concerns. I have written about the power that a rich family in Bombay has over the illiterate domestic servant who works for them, about an American couple living in India who assumes that the rules don't apply to them, about how adults abuse their authority over powerless children. Most recently, I have tackled the issue of Islamic fundamentalism, but from a non-American, non-9/11 perspective.

I guess you could say, this is my life's theme—the exploration of how power corrupts human relationships, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the endless struggle for happiness that human beings engage in.

So I try not to think too much about genre. What matters to me is the human heart that beats at the center of all great stories. When I look back on my writing life, I see that the vehicles may be different—poems, short stories, news stories, novels—but the passengers are the same. The passengers are always struggling to move from darkness into light; they

are often inchoate and inarticulate, but fumbling toward greater human communication; and they are almost always held together by that shaft of grace that we call love. ■

*Thrity Umrigar, a 2000 Nieman Fellow, is the author of a memoir and five novels, including the bestselling "The Space Between Us," published in 2006 by HarperCollins and "The World We Found," to be published by HarperCollins in January 2012. For more about her and her books, go to [www.umrigar.com](http://www.umrigar.com).*

## Novels Win Out Over Journalism

'The biggest shift in going from journalism to books is not from scribe to artist, but employee to entrepreneur—suddenly self-employed, with no benefits, no expense account, and no security.'

BY WILLIAM DIETRICH

I became a journalist so I could write, rather than a writer so I could practice journalism. Accordingly, it's been a slow but natural transition to move from newspapering at The Seattle Times to writing nonfiction books and fiction. I had dreamed of being a novelist since I was a kid, and now am the astonished author of 15 books and counting.

With journalism in turmoil, book writing is an obvious alternative. Unfortunately the book industry is in turmoil too, with Borders declaring bankruptcy (the latest in a long line of mass market store-on-pavement booksellers to do so), independent bookstores under siege, and e-books challenging the old economics.

Is a move to book writing like leaping from the frying pan to the fire? The list of journalists-turned-author is legion, including Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Joan Didion, Carl Hiaasen, Susan Sontag,

and Michael Connelly. Even longer would be a list of reporters who tried books and didn't care for the labor, uncertainty and poor return.

Publishers rely on reporters' ability to produce on demand, be succinct, meet deadlines, cooperate with editors, and write for general audiences. Unfortunately, book writing is even more competitive than journalism. Publishers in the United States alone issue more than 6,000 books a week. Entry can be hard: agent Jennifer Weltz told the Historical Novel Society in June that of 8,000 queries she receives in a typical year, she will take on five new clients. And like professional sports, acting or music, writing books tends to be a winner-take-all profession in which the top authors—often celebrities to start with—reap outsize rewards while the majority of authors, including many who were journalists, struggle.

I've been fortunate. Books got my

kids through college and produced the bulk of my retirement savings. (This says more about newspaper pay than my success as an author.) But book writing is unstable, and during the 21 years that I've had some kind of book contract, I've also worked as a full-time journalist, half-time journalist, half-time college professor, freelancer, ghostwriter, speaker, or consultant to keep things going. In 2001, when I gambled on a new novel and 9/11 temporarily shut down the industry, my income was zero.

Aspiring authors talk craft. Established authors talk business. The biggest shift in going from journalism to books is not from scribe to artist, but employee to entrepreneur—suddenly self-employed, with no benefits, no expense account, and no security. Your mission is to become a brand, figure out how to market it, and then reapply for your job every year or two with a new and enticing proposal for a publisher.



Why do it? Freedom. Control. Creativity. Self-expression. No commute. No news cycle. With the right combination of talent, persistence and luck, there's a chance to earn more money than in a newsroom. Books can also earn you royalties for years or decades after publication.

Cover a topic of high interest—such as terrorism, Wall Street shenanigans, a politician or celebrity from your own stomping grounds, or a “stay-healthy”—and there's the likelihood of getting a contract and monetary advance for a nonfiction book by producing a compelling 20- to 40-page proposal with convincing evidence that the idea can sell and that you know how to sell it. Publishers produce at least two times as many nonfiction books as novels and are looking for journalist storytellers. To get a novel published means producing the entire book before trying to sell it.

### First Book—To Last

There's no typical route to authorship, but mine is illustrative. Simon & Schuster wanted a book on the Northwest timber wars in 1989, a dispute I covered. I wrote a proposal, it went back and forth several times, and FedEx coincidentally stuck the

contract in my screen door the same day in 1990 that I shared a Pulitzer Prize for covering the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

My exasperated agent said the modest \$30,000 advance could have doubled if I had known the prize was coming.

I didn't. I also centered that 1992 book, “The Final Forest,” in Forks, Washington, but failed to put a single vampire in it. Later I calculated that author Stephenie Meyer sold more copies of her “Twilight” series in 20 minutes than I had of “The Final Forest” in 20 years. So it goes.

A book on the Columbia River followed, but a half dozen others on that subject came out the same spring. Bumping into such competition is a likely consequence of writing books on newsworthy topics.

When I couldn't sell an idea for a nonfiction book on Antarctica, I decided to try a novel based on a real-life Nazi expedition to the continent. It was a mess: I had to get rid of Hitler, pick up the pace, and more fully develop characters.

In journalism you often conceal your heart; in fiction you mine it. In journalism facts can carry a story; in fiction the telling becomes crucial so style and insight grow in importance. Newspaper editors cut the clutter of descriptive detail while fiction editors demand it. In journalism the punch line usually comes at the beginning, in fiction usually at the end. And so on. I spent nine months revising after it initially sold, but “Ice Reich” did well enough to launch my fiction career. I'm now editing an 11th novel and starting two more.

Having made every mistake in the book (pun intended), here's some advice:

- Newsroom skills like timeliness, localizing the story, and speed are

less useful for books. Your story should be as timeless and global as possible. It can take at least a year to write a book, a year from acceptance to publication, and a year to paperback. Aim high, write for the ages, and think foreign and digital rights.

- Don't write for mom, your English professor, city editor, the critics, or newsroom know-it-alls. Write for you and (maybe) the folks at the mall.
- Think audience and where your words will be shelved. Readers must recognize your “brand” and know where to find you. My reluctance to define myself cost me sales.
- For commercial fiction, you'll likely be asked to do a book a year, to be flexible to trends, and to heed marketing. Listen.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Read books on how to write books. For nonfiction, start with “Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—and Get it Published,” by Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato.
- Don't dabble, plunge. Get a website and Internet presence, attend and speak at writer conferences, read at bookstores, study your genre. Few authors hit it big with their first book. Philip Roth has written about 30 books, Stephen King and Elmore Leonard about 50, Danielle Steel 105, Nora Roberts 210. Hard work!

I tremendously enjoyed journalism. But burnout, health issues, age and the newspaper slump meant books came at a good time for me. It's probably easier to stick with journalism. But some have the itch. If you have to scratch, you know it. ■

*William Dietrich, a 1988 Nieman Fellow, has written 15 books. His most recent novel is “Blood of the Reich,” published by HarperCollins. His website is [www.williamdietrich.com](http://www.williamdietrich.com).*

# Will I Ever Write the Book? Why Not?

'I teach nonfiction books. I study them, praise them, and pick them apart, and as I do so, I often wonder what's holding me back from writing one.'

BY BRET SCHULTE

I'm addicted to news. I believe in the watchdog role of the Fourth Estate and that our democracy and way of life depend on a free press. When I teach journalism at the University of Arkansas, I preach these sentiments to my students. But these are not the reasons I got into journalism. I wanted a place to write.

As an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, I thought I might be a novelist. I was an English major with a real thing for Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald and all of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation." Then, through the mortifying experience of a sophomore fiction writing class, I was confronted with the possibility that I had no imagination. I was a terrible dreamer.

Still, I felt I was a writer who should be out there learning things and writing things. My words should find an audience. Call me naïve or idealistic or a narcissist; it is probably a mix of all those things. But after joining the student newspaper and after many years of working as a professional journalist and after earning a master's in fine arts in nonfiction writing, I figured out that this urge to be out there wasn't mine alone. It penetrated every newsroom I worked in. Seems like it's a basic requirement for the job.

And that's good. The industry is blessed with people who should be out there; the kind of people who can track the glimmer of a story in the shadows and cracks, who can wiggle in, push it out, find the sources, the facts, the narrative, and expand it into a piece that shines a blinding light on a subject. Those stories won't be told without good reporting. But they don't attract an audience without good writing.

Journalism is where good writers



After "The New Journalism" anthology was published in 1973, journalists wanted to write nonfiction "novels."

go who want to make a living at their craft. Name a bunch of novelists who aren't holding down a second job. What about poets? The best are transcendent. Shakespeare was a poet. So was Goethe. When was the last time you bought a book of poetry?

It's no surprise then that so many reporters become book authors, too. In fact, at many magazines and national newspapers, such as The New York Times, it's the new normal. The question for folks like me, reporters who fancy themselves writers, is: Why the hell haven't you written a book? The pressure is on.

It used to be enough just to leap from market to bigger market, from beat to bigger beat, swinging your way up the food chain until you get to what used to be called the "destination paper"—The New York Times, Los Angeles Times,

Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, or maybe a national magazine. With print crumbling, the old paths to success are being dismantled.

Emerging from this rubble is each reporter as a brand—an authority, a producer of multimedia and social media, an all-media entrepreneur. And that even includes the granddaddy of media—the book.

## Literary Aspirations

It's not as though journalists haven't traveled a similar road before. In a few of my journalism classes, we read Tom Wolfe's seminal treatise on literary journalism in his 1973 anthology "The New Journalism." In it, he writes about the newsrooms of the 1960's and, in particular, the dark fate of feature writers who regarded newspapers as a "motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph." The triumph was the novel, at a time when the novel reigned supreme.

Wolfe writes about how some reporters actually pulled it off. There was, he tells us, a newsman named Charles Portis, who left his plum London bureau gig to return to Arkansas to write in a fishing shack. He emerged with two novels, the latter being "True Grit." Wolfe, practically screaming, writes, "A fishing shack! In Arkansas! It was too goddamned perfect to be true, and yet there it was. Which is to say that the old dream, the Novel, has never died."

Literary aspirations have long stirred lowly news reporters. But Wolfe and others were responsible for re-casting that old dream. In newspapers and magazines they shrugged off the conventions of newswriting and swiped whatever they could from fiction writing. Scene-by-scene construction,

extended dialogue, multiple points of view, and as Wolfe calls it, a person's "status life," the possessions, the speech, the mannerisms, the customs, habits, and all the things that go into the way people "express their position in the world, or what they think it is or what they hope it is to be."

Naturally, some of those articles became books. Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Jimmy Breslin all published literary nonfiction books, which Wolfe hailed as displacing the novel, a form he regarded as having given up on reality. The list of journalists-cum-authors since then is immense. And they're not writing novels. They're writing best-selling nonfiction, such as Mark Bowden (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), author of "Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War"; Ron Suskind (*The Wall Street Journal*), author of, most recently, "Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President"; Isabel Wilkerson (*The New York Times*), author of "The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration"; Steve Coll (*The Washington Post*), author of "Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2011." Their names and titles go on and on.

When I ask my news and editorial students why they're drawn to journalism, the vast majority say "writing." Delivering the news/informing the public is a distant second. This is not to say that both ideas aren't important to them, but there are a lot of ways to deliver the news. These kids want to write. And the power of the book still holds sway over young journalists, just as Wolfe noticed.

Students in my Literature of Journalism class marvel at the power of the nonfiction book, noting how temporary and fleeting newspaper stories are in comparison. "There's no skimming in a nonfiction book,"

said one student. "You really engage the reader." Another noted: "When I read a news article, I take away what it was about. When I read literary journalism, I think about the issue but also the way it was presented. I give the author credit." It was "hard to go back to fiction now that I know the real world can be written about so vividly," one said, while another made the point that writing books can liberate a journalist from depending on newspapers as a source of income, no small consideration in this day and age (though there is no guarantee this will happen, either). "It's pretty hard to ignore the romance of writing a book," one student observed, and in

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**Now it's not even enough to write a book. It has to be the book—important, and showing people something they've never seen before. It has to be a towering display of reporting and a show pony of storytelling. It has to be ... genius.**

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doing so captured the allure the book has held for generations of journalists.

### The Author's Itch

I've wanted to write a book since I was in college. That's why I went to George Mason University for a master's of fine arts in writing. I also worked for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *The Washington Post*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. While I found these jobs satisfying, I also felt the nagging notion that all this was just prep work for something bigger. That feeling has only grown since I started teaching. I teach nonfiction books. I study them, praise them, and pick them apart, and as I do so, I often wonder what's holding me back from writing one.

What, I ask myself, prevents me from joining the class of the new elite, the reporter as author? Now it's not even enough to write a book. It has to be *the* book—important, and show-

ing people something they've never seen before. It has to be a towering display of reporting and a show pony of storytelling. It has to be ... genius.

On good days I like to think that it's because I haven't found my topic yet. But that's a cop-out. What is really going on is that all this study of books, as a student and as a professor, has driven home how hard writing a book is to do well. And the bar just keeps getting higher. Consider the true-life storytelling from Laura Hillenbrand, the frontline war narrative produced by Dexter Filkins, or the character-driven historic accounts by Erik Larson.

I know how hard this is to do. I was a research assistant for memoirist and biographer Beverly Lowry and studied under another noted biographer, Meryle Secrest. I've written magazine cover stories and other in-depth reports. It is not easy. I know the obsession it requires, the mania it can induce, and the sacrifices that have to be made.

Knowing all of this is the braking mechanism that stops me from going after the big prize, from attempting to join the ranks of those journalists that Wolfe so vaunted, the ones that "wiped out the novel as literature's main event."

I always felt Wolfe was writing to his fellow reporters in that essay, reassuring us that writing a great story—the great book—has nothing to do with having a big imagination. It's about finding a story worth telling, then using the right tools to tell it. I know he's right. Someday I will be a reporter-cum-author. Just as soon as I find my topic. ■

*Bret Schulte is an assistant professor in the journalism department at the University of Arkansas and a freelance writer.*

# Leapfrogging the Book: A Newspaper Story Jumps to Film

‘The desire to have the best—or most salable—story must never undermine our responsibility to challenge even our most compelling material.’

BY PAUL LIEBERMAN

**W**eeks after I arrived in Los Angeles in 1984 a producer called and asked if I’d write a film. I sensed it wasn’t supposed to be that easy but headed out to “do lunch,” all the while imagining scenes for “our movie.” The producer had seen a series I’d written for the Atlanta newspapers about pornography king Mike Thevis, who brought peep shows out from sin centers such as Times Square into the American heartland, blowing away rivals in the process. I laughed to myself thinking how we might dramatize porn becoming mainstream by showing a convention where XXX-rated fare was sold openly, with row after row of chocolate body parts.

By the time I arrived at the producer’s office I had a few actors in mind as well. He threw out names, too—big stars!—while driving us to the restaurant in his Rolls Royce with a license plate bearing the title of his last film, a small-budget horror flick. Over burgers he said, “Let’s do it!” and proposed a deal—I’d get “two points” for writing the script, meaning just a share of the proceeds, with no guarantee I’d make a dime for my work. I said, “Fine, and in the meantime you’ll pay me how much?” and that was the end of our beautiful friendship, in the parlance of “Casablanca.”

The Hollywood fantasy comes easily. If you produce ambitious narrative journalism it’s not hard to imagine your work making it to the Big Screen, with your real-life characters played by George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and his luscious significant other, Angelina Jolie. You can write the book, sure, with a first printing of 20,000 if you’re fortunate. But these days our culture’s shared experiences



Gangster Squad, the secretive Los Angeles Police Department unit whose job it was to get the mob out of Los Angeles, circa 1948. Photo by Gangster Squad member Conwell Keeler.

rarely involve the printed word, the Harry Potter franchise aside. Ponder the allure of a wide-release opening weekend generating \$20 million or \$50 million at the box office. Why not dream big?

From the start of my journalism career, I was drawn to dramatic stories—a notorious cop killer who claimed to have been reborn in prison, a surgeon who butchered young children until other doctors around him revolted, a reclusive heiress who died mysteriously and left her \$1 billion estate in care of her butler, a hospital killer who lurked on the graveyard shift, and so on. Like many

cornball reporters, I found the work so rewarding I sometimes felt guilty taking a paycheck, even when earning \$120 a week.

But if you generate stories like that, you don’t have to do anything to get intriguing feelers—they’ll ring you up, all these producers and agents looking for material, some wannabes, sure, but real ones too. So for years I found myself negotiating option deals, promoting potential mini-series, writing film treatments, and one-paragraph (“back of the napkin”) pitches, along with one full script, all the while taking lots of lunches ... without a single movie being made.



Hoodlum Mickey Cohen, center, smiled as marshals escorted him from federal court in Los Angeles, California in 1951 after he was sentenced to five years in the penitentiary for income tax evasion. *Photo by The Associated Press.*

The daunting odds were underscored in Robert Altman's "The Player," in which Tim Robbins portrays a studio executive who kills a screenwriter whose pitch he rejected. In a scene set in a Palm Springs spa, Robbins explains to his naïve new paramour how his studio fields 50,000 submissions a year and green-lights only a dozen. "Everyone who calls ... they think that come New Year's it will be just them and Jack Nicholson on the slopes of Aspen ... The problem is I can only say 'yes' ... 12 times a year."

Which brings us to my "yes."

### From Tip to Film

I am writing this with bleary eyes after a long night on the streets of Los Angeles, where Warner Brothers is shooting "The Gangster Squad" based, with dramatic liberties, on my 2008 Los Angeles Times series about a secretive police unit given the job of driving the mob out of Los Angeles after World War II. Sean Penn plays the showboating hoodlum Mickey Cohen and Josh

Brolin and Ryan Gosling, Hollywood's heartthrob of the moment, play cops obsessed with bringing him to justice or to the morgue while Emma Stone is the main love interest, caught between Cohen and the cop played by Gosling. Her character is invented, but the cops were real, the ones whose stories I began chronicling two decades ago.

In 1992, I got a call out of the blue from a reader wanting to correct an article that discussed the history of a police division accused of questionable snooping. The caller, clearly an older man, said we'd failed to mention the Gangster Squad, formed in 1946. When I asked how he knew about it, he said, "Well, I was on it." The next day I was in the living room of long-retired Sgt. Jack O'Mara, intent on getting down his stories, even if it was hard to see how they'd fit into a daily newspaper. Then I tracked down other survivors of the squad that waged a guerrilla war to keep organized crime from gaining the same foothold in Los Angeles as it had in cities back east. I kept at it for years, in my spare time, even

after moving to New York to work as a cultural correspondent. When the main figures began to die off, I finally found editors who agreed that we didn't need a conventional news peg in an era when everyone was groping to find new ways to reach readers.

"L.A. Noir: Tales From the Gangster Squad" ran in October 2008 as a seven-day serial, focusing on two cops who made getting Cohen a personal crusade. One was O'Mara, who'd managed to sneak guns out of Cohen's house and etch initials under the butt plates so they could be tied to him if ever used in a murder. The second, roguish Jerry Wooters, forged a secret alliance with one of Cohen's rivals, hulking Jack "The Enforcer" Whalen, who was shot down by Cohen's crew in the closing days of the 1950's.

In the spirit of the times, I also created videos for the Web. The first day's showed evocative night shots of the city, bullet holes in vintage cars, and scar-faced Cohen, all while a deep-voiced narrator (yours truly) promised the unfolding story of "Two

cops. Two hoodlums. And the killing that ended an era in Los Angeles.” Some colleagues noted that it came across like a movie trailer, as if I was using the package to play “Let’s Make a Deal” with Hollywood. To which I replied, “Who me?”

Of course, even the thought of cashing in that way poses ethical issues for a journalist that novelists or screenwriters don’t face. I may quip about an ambitious project, “Some of it is even true,” but that’s a joke. The desire to have the best—or most salable—story must never undermine our responsibility to challenge even our most compelling material. I loved the renegade cop’s tale of being offered a guard dog by his hulking gangster pal. Wooters said he told Whalen he didn’t want any @\$%# dog, “They die on you, then you’re miserable,” only to have the gangster come back at him with all the ways Cohen could ambush him with shotguns or plant a bomb in his car ... until he had to give in: “Where do I pick up the dog?” Great stuff, almost *too* good, and you could run with it under the rationale, “Well, he said it.” But I felt much better when I tracked down the hoodlum’s sister,

still alive at 90, to see if she recalled the gift dog, a Great Dane. “Yes, sure,” she said, “Thor.”

A commercial film, on the other hand, thrives on embellishment. I deserve little credit—none, actually—for “The Gangster Squad” getting the final “yes” that will put it in theaters across the country in October 2012. I did not even try to get the job of writing the screenplay—a partner and I once insisted on that with a comedy project about to be packaged by a leading talent agency and killed our deal. In this case, in a touch of poetic justice, Warner Brothers gave the scripting assignment to a Los Angeles cop-turned-writer, Will Beall, who had authored a gritty novel about street gangs, “L.A. Rex.” With “The Gangster Squad,” he understood that the studio wanted to go big, with flying bullets and fists.

In real life, the cops had Tommy guns—slept with ‘em under their beds—but, no, they didn’t have wild shootouts in front of the old Park Plaza Hotel, the sort of scene required if the film was going to become the Los Angeles version of “The Untouchables.” Beall’s muscular script helped get Penn to sign

on as Cohen, a character he was sure to mold himself. After that, the rest of the A-list cast fell into place, eager to work with Penn and up-and-coming director Ruben Fleischer, known for his evocative visual style—he’d likely show spinning cartridges being ejected from the Tommy guns in super slow motion.

Another journalist selling a story to Hollywood asked me, “How much creative control do you get?” I asked back, “Do you want that on a 10-point scale or 1-to-100?” The answer in either case was “zero.” You may provide plenty of memos and briefings, but basically go along for the ride ... and, if you’re lucky, to the bank.

Yet on the set, I’ve been gratified by how many of the actors and crew ask, “Did this really happen?” “What was he really like?” “Did they ever ...?” I’ve grown hoarse answering but there’s a moral to all those questions: That’s why you write the book. ■

*Paul Lieberman, a 1980 Nieman Fellow, is working on a book version of “The Gangster Squad.”*

## Dealing with Hollywood

*Paul Lieberman offers tips—and cautions—for journalists when film or TV folks are interested in a story you have reported.*

- Make sure the rights to your story are yours to sell—some publications may insist that they retain any film or TV rights.
- Don’t take any steps to sell story rights until your piece or series has been published. Otherwise you have dual masters ... and perhaps a financial stake in puffing up the material.
- Keep your editors informed of what you are doing to make sure you are complying with the ethical guidelines of your publication.
- Understand that while producers may want rights to your story as a way of developing a film or TV project, they may instead seek “life rights” from the characters about whom you have written.
- The deal often starts with selling merely an option to buy rights to your story. While this can be profitable in itself, especially if a project is nursed for years—requiring renewal of the option—don’t be shocked if the initial option payment is quite small.
- If there is considerable interest in your work, don’t try to weed through the offers on your own. Get an agent who can better evaluate the legitimacy of potential bidders and which one has the best chance of actually getting a film made, the step that triggers the bigger payoff.
- Your role in the actual production is, like everything else, negotiable. You may play no role, serve as a consultant—perhaps with a producing credit, or even write or co-write the script, though that would be rare. ■

## Journalism: Done The Atavist Way

‘... I liked the idea of being part of something new and something that attempts to reinvigorate the field of long-form journalism by re-engineering the business model that pays for it.’

BY DAVID WOLMAN



On Apple devices, David Wolman’s “The Instigators” is augmented with infographics, a video clip, and this graphic artist’s rendering of a tense meeting the article describes. *Illustration by Jason Oldak.*

In the final days of Egypt’s revolution to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak, I was in the snowy mountains of Colorado for a vacation with the in-laws. There was no way I was going to unplug, though. Like most, I had been captivated by events in the Middle East. I also had something of an inside line. Every few days I received short correspondences via e-mail or text message from two activists in Cairo I had gotten to know in 2008 while reporting a story for *Wired* about young people using social media to organize against Mubarak’s regime.

Two and a half years later I was stunned to learn that many of these same activists from the April 6 Youth Movement were now at the center of the revolution—organizing marches, coordinating efforts with other anti-Mubarak groups, and spearheading efforts to communicate a message of nonviolence. When the uprising began, I started contacting them to check that they were safe. By the second week I was writing a few short items for *Wired.com* and *TheAtlantic.com*.

On February 10 I received a text message from Ahmed Maher, cofounder of the April 6 Youth Movement: “Mubarak will go now. LOL.” By the next day Mubarak’s reign was finished. It was then that I knew I needed to go back to Cairo to write a fuller account of how Maher and his cohorts had transformed from rabble-rousers into full-fledged revolutionaries and chronicle what they had experienced in the lead-up to and during the uprising.

## Pushing Past Rejections

I banged out a pitch and sent it to editors at four or five prestigious magazines. The rejections came in rapid succession: “This is a great proposal, but unfortunately we already have some Egyptian coverage in the works.” “It sounds like a fascinating and timely story, but it’s not one we can use right now.” “Thanks for giving us a shot. Given other things in our lineup, turns out there’s no way.”

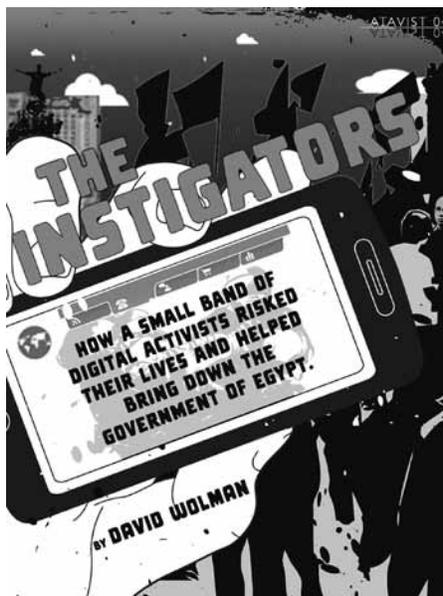
Digital publishing start-up The Atavist had been on my radar; two of its founders are Wired alums, and I’d read a short piece about the project in Bloomberg BusinessWeek. The Atavist commissions and publishes long-form stories as e-books for various devices—Kindle, iPad, Nook, etc.—or to be read on computers using e-reader software such as Kindle for PC. It’s strictly digital. No paper. If that fact makes you prickly, you should probably quit reading this essay.

E-publishing was still rather foreign to me. I don’t even own an e-reader or tablet computer. But I liked the idea of being part of something new and something that attempts to reinvigorate the field of long-form journalism by re-engineering the business model that pays for it. That, plus I really wanted to get after it with this Egypt story.

I sent my pitch to Evan Ratliff, editor of The Atavist, and after a little back and forth, he said yes. He could even pay me. It wasn’t a huge amount, but it was respectable, particularly when measured against other upstart publications that so often expect writers to work for a pittance.

## How The Atavist Works

Ratliff and his fellow cofounders have also devised a curiously attractive profit-sharing arrangement with writers that can best be described as a kind of hybrid magazine-book deal. When you write a book, your publisher gives you an advance, and only when



you’ve earned enough in sales to pay it back do you start to earn royalties—generally on the order of 15 percent of bookseller price per (hardcover) unit, which roughly works out to a dollar per book. The margin is even thinner for paperbacks. The Atavist, in contrast, shares profits 50-50 with writers (after Amazon, Apple, and the like take their cut, which is about 30 percent, although it varies depending on the platform and whether sales are domestic or international). True, The Atavist stories only cost \$1.99 or \$2.99. But the sharing kicks in from the first sale, and there’s potential for decent after-publication earnings. Not so with magazine assignments, even if an article you write turns out to be wildly popular.

On the nearly empty flight from Amsterdam to Cairo last March, I realized that I’d never written anything like this before. With digital publishing, there is no word-count limit. That obviously doesn’t necessarily make for better writing, but the real estate concerns that sometimes plague magazine stories and lead to the death of whole scenes or sections just don’t exist with e-books. I could swing for the fences in terms of material gath-

ered, backstories reported, and scenes recreated. From the get-go, Ratliff and I had in mind that this could easily be a 10,000-word story. After whittling away about 4,000, the final version came in around 10,500.

What I couldn’t appreciate about e-publishing until we were near to closing was just how much other information we could weave into and around the piece. While I was doing what I normally do—reporting, writing and rewriting—Ratliff and Atavist producer Olivia Koski had been scheming ways to enliven the reader experience.<sup>1</sup> They commissioned a graphic artist to draw the scene of a tense meeting that occurs in the opening section. They pinpointed places mentioned in the story on a Google map of Cairo, which readers can jump to with a click. They embedded a video clip of the protests and sprinkled some of my photographs from Cairo and Alexandria into the text. They commissioned an infographics wizard to put together an elaborate timeline of events, and we also decided to pay for an Arabic translation, which we give away for free.

Some people have mixed feelings about all this augmentation. Don’t the bells and whistles detract from the prose and reader engagement with it? To that concern, I would say: Take 30 seconds to look at the software. You can turn off all the extras with a single click. But if you ever change your mind and decide you do want some added information about a character in the story or you want to see a photograph of one of the revolutionaries’ hideouts in Cairo, it’s all there waiting for you. As one generally technophobic friend of mine put it: “It’s a totally different kind of reading!”

“The Instigators” was published in early May, about seven weeks after I returned from Cairo. Early reactions were encouraging, with some favorable write-ups in a couple of publications and even positive customer reviews posted to Amazon by people who

<sup>1</sup> Most of these bonus features are currently only available with Apple devices, but as e-reader technology improves, they may become available on other platforms as well.

aren't my cousins.

What hasn't been so sunny? For one thing, I don't know what to call it. Among e-book enthusiasts "single" (or Kindle Single) is shorthand for a work that is generally too long to be a magazine feature but too short to be a book. For much of the world, though, the lingo of "singles," "e-books" and "e-readers" still causes confusion, akin to talking about CDs in 1985. (A few months ago, I tried referring to "The Instigators" as a "mega-feature," but that's clunky and makes me sound like an appliance salesman.)

It has also been a bit of a challenge to make more people aware of the story's existence—it's not on any real-world bookshelves, and Atavist doesn't have an army of publicists working on my behalf. Even people who want to read it sometimes need guidance on how to get it. Since publication, I've written the following far too many times:

You don't need a tablet computer or Kindle to read it. Just

download the (free) Kindle-for-Mac or Kindle-for-PC software, install it—it takes all of 80 seconds—and then you're off!

I've been happy with sales, which continue steadily, but make no mistake: There is no zippy sports car in my future. And it's difficult to determine what marketing strategies helped, hurt or were just a waste of time. For example, we sold an excerpt to TheAtlantic.com. It's impossible to know if that translated into a substantial number of sales or whether people who read the teaser found it to be a sufficient dose of inside information about Egypt's revolution, and decided against coughing up the \$2 or \$3 for the whole piece. Still, the attention this new marketplace is getting keeps me optimistic. As of late November, "The Instigators" was still a top rated Kindle Single, which should keep the sales coming. I hope.

Only occasionally do I encounter someone who voices suspicion about

the form, as if to imply that I've either produced a B-rate product or somehow betrayed literature itself by publishing straight to digital. What those people fail to recognize is that e-publishing in The Atavist model or some future iteration of it offers a new way of supporting professional writers and stands in contrast to the prediction that narrative nonfiction can't survive in the age of Twitter. I like physical books and magazines as much as the next guy. What I like even more, though, is long-form storytelling. If its future is in the digital realm, so be it. ■

*David Wolman is an author, journalist and a contributing editor at Wired. "The Instigators," his e-book about Egypt's revolution, can be found at [www.Atavist.net](http://www.Atavist.net). His book, "The End of Money," is to be published by Da Capo Press in February 2012. More information is on his website, [www.david-wolman.com](http://www.david-wolman.com). He tweets @davidwolman.*

## It's a Long Article. It's a Short Book. No, It's a Byliner E-Book.

'Our idea was to create a new way for writers to be able to tell stories at what had always been considered a financially awkward length.'

BY JOHN TAYMAN

**H**ow many words do I have? It's a question I'm accustomed to asking whenever I write a story. Sometimes I ask it of myself, more often of my editor. Before I started writing this piece, I asked the editor of this magazine for a length.

"You've got 1,000 words," she replied.

That's an arbitrary word count, of course, since I could tell the story of our eight-month-old digital publishing

effort in fewer words. Or I could tell it in more. With my words destined for Nieman Reports's print pages—and for its website—it's natural for the editor to think about how many words she wants and what visuals might accompany them. This is a sensible approach and until recently was how publishing worked, whether in a magazine or a book. Editors assigned story lengths, then slashed or stretched what got delivered to a workable word count,

even when that count might not serve the story well.

Over the years, I've often been the one doing such slashing and stretching. It's never fun. Some stories escaped unscathed, but most suffered—and their writers suffered—simply because a few magazine ads went unsold or the marketing department felt a fatter spine would sell more copies in bookstores. Oh, we waxed poetic about "letting the story find its natural

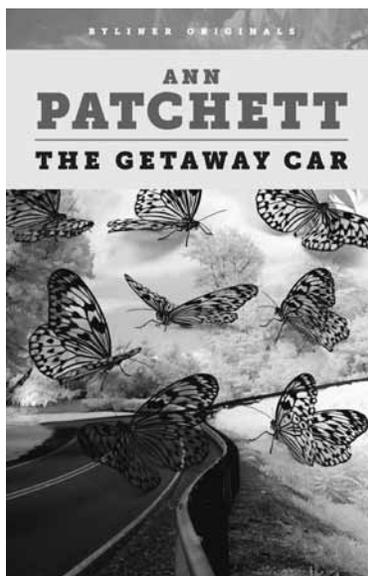
## The Writing Life: Examined in a Digital Minibook

Earlier this year novelist Ann Patchett published on *Byliner* what it described as “a practical memoir about the agony, ecstasy, and occasional lunacy of the writing life.” What follows is an excerpt from “The Getaway Car,” the minibook she wrote for *Byliner*, where it sells for \$2.99:

Even if I don’t believe in writer’s block, I certainly believe in procrastination. Writing can be frustrating and demoralizing, and so it’s only natural that we try to put it off. But don’t give “putting it off” a magic label. Writer’s block is something out of our control, like a blocked kidney—we are not responsible. We are, however, entirely responsible for procrastination, and in the best of all possible worlds, we should also be responsible for being honest with ourselves about what is really going on.

I have a habit of ranking everything in my life that needs doing. The thing I least want to do is number one on the list, and that is almost always writing fiction. The second thing on the list may be calling Verizon to dispute a charge on my bill, or cleaning the oven. Below that, there is mail to answer, an article to write for a newspaper in Australia about the five most influential books in my life and why. What this means is that I will zoom through a whole host

of unpleasant tasks in an attempt to avoid item number one—writing fiction. (I admit this is complicated, that I can simultaneously profess to love writing and to hate it, but if you’ve read this far you must be pretty interested in writing yourself, and if you are, well, you know what I’m talking about.)



The beautiful thing about living in Provincetown [Massachusetts] in the winter, and having no money and no place to spend it even if I did, was that there was rarely anything in the number two spot on my to-do list. There was really nothing to distract me from the work I was there to do, and so the

work got done.

The lesson is this: The more we are willing to separate from distraction and step into the open arms of boredom, the more writing will get on the page.

If you want to write and can’t figure out how to do it, try this: Pick an amount of time to sit at your desk every day. Start with 20 minutes, say, and work up as quickly as possible to as much time as you can spare. Do you really want to write? Sit for two hours a day. During that time, you don’t have to write, but you must stay at your desk without distraction: no phone, no Internet, no books. Sit. Still. Quietly. Do this for a week, for two weeks. Do not nap or check your e-mail. Keep on sitting for as long as you remain interested in writing. Sooner or later you will write because you will no longer be able to stand not writing—or you’ll get up and turn the television on because you will no longer be able to stand all the sitting. Either way, you’ll have your answer.

I once gave this entire explanation to an earnest group of college freshmen who had all suffered cruelly from writer’s block. When I finished, one girl raised her hand. “Clearly, you’ve just never had it,” she said, and the other students nodded in relieved agreement. Maybe not. ■

length.” But deep down we knew it wasn’t possible. A story that needed 10,000, 20,000 or even 30,000 words to be properly told inevitably fell into publishing’s dead zone. This represented the vast wasteland of impossible-to-place stories that were longer than magazine space permitted

and shorter than a book was thought to be.

### Swift Publication

In January 2009, a year before the iPad was launched and two years before Amazon introduced Kindle Singles, I

was chatting with some writers and editors about an idea for a company that would bring stories that fell into that dead zone to life. Our idea was to create a new way for writers to be able to tell stories at what had always been considered a financially awkward length. Such articles—at this longer

length they were likely to be told as narrative accounts—would be reported and written swiftly, not unlike a magazine piece. We'd sell them on digital platforms as e-books.

Back then I scribbled this note about our concept: Essentially, we're creating a royalty system for long magazine pieces, and the writer benefits from the first copy sold. It's a nice change of pace for established book writers, looking to test-drive an idea or to clean their palate after a multi-year project. For established magazine writers, they're actually invested in their pieces.

As always, word count would matter, but not in an overly limiting way for writers. These swiftly conceived and completed books would be done at a length—fewer than 30,000 words—that would make them readable in two hours or less. (The average American reads 250 words per minute.) We wanted to give writers the opportunity to draw out the complexities of a story and get it in front of potential readers while the event or action or news is relatively current. Our strategy would liberate them from the pre-determined schedules of traditional book and magazine publishing.

At least, this was our theory, tested with our first Byliner Original by Jon Krakauer. He was troubled by certain details in Greg Mortenson's bestselling book, "Three Cups of Tea" and had heard unsettling allegations about his charity work. He knew there was an important story to be told—which required depth and length, but the investigative piece he wrote was 20,000 words long. At that length, it didn't work as either a conventional magazine piece or a book. There were timing challenges with publishing it, too: Krakauer wanted to release his story when a "60 Minutes" report on Mortenson would be aired in mid-April. Yet he wanted also to be able



Stories	Followers	Recommends	Reads	Books
13	910	27	39892	7

Byliner.com collects and shares information about its authors' social media connections.

to keep reporting—adding details to his investigative essay, as he unearthed them—up until its release.

Happily, we discovered he could do this. Byliner published "Three Cups of Deceit" at 22,000 words, some of which were written, edited, checked up to an hour before publication and based on reporting he'd finished that day. We released Krakauer's e-book on our website immediately after "60 Minutes" aired its own exposé, in which Krakauer was featured. As our website's initial offering, his e-book was made available free of charge during the first 72 hours when some 70,000 readers downloaded the PDF version. When his e-book went on sale in Amazon's Kindle Singles store—neither Apple's Quick Reads nor Barnes & Noble's shorts digital storefront were open yet—it quickly became the top selling e-book; it has sold steadily ever since at \$2.99. In subsequent months, Byliner has sold more 100,000 e-books, including those written by bestselling authors such as Ann Patchett, Mark Bittman, and William T. Vollmann.

### Aggregating Audience

The writing and publishing of e-books tells only half of Byliner's story. With our (relatively) long gestation period, we spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about how our site's e-books would be discovered and how writers would acquire and grow their

fan bases. We knew we didn't want to rely on the customary book-publishing model—get the book into stores, send the author out to talk it up, and hope for good reviews so it can gather an audience. We wanted to upend that scenario by aggregating an audience via an author's social network; in this way, we could commission an original e-book and publish it (essentially presold) into that targeted fan base.

To do this, we worked to construct a discovery platform to complement our publishing efforts. Byliner.com utilizes well-known social media techniques, such as a Twitter-like system alert so that readers don't miss the publication of an e-book by their favorite writers, as well as a Pandora-like recommendation system that helps readers discover new authors. Importantly, it also enables authors to leverage their back catalogs of narrative pieces so they can better market their latest e-book.

Even though our pieces are long—at least when compared with newspaper or magazine pieces—we still keep an eye on word count at Byliner. For example, we know that the average word count of the Byliner Originals we've published is 23,765 per e-book. If a fan of Michael Lewis wants to check out his long-form stories, Byliner can point him to stories he's written adding up to 428,465 words. In all, readers can choose among more than 60 million words that we've collected, organized, published or spotlighted. Our focus is on providing writers with the space that works well to tell long-form contemporary stories and the platform from which to sell them. Yet, we also know that Byliner is working as a go-to place for readers looking for vivid storytelling that displays depth, breadth and complexity—without all of those hundreds of pages to turn. ■

*John Tayman is founder and chief executive officer of Byliner.*

# Transformation in Publishing and Optimism About Books

‘An enduring challenge for journalists is to take their experiences, background and skills as a writer and turn them into a fully developed narrative.’

*Nieman Reports editor Melissa Ludtke talked by phone with Peter Osnos, the founder and editor at large of PublicAffairs books. In “The Platform,” a weekly column he writes for The Century Foundation, Osnos often focuses on book publishing. The two decades he was at The Washington Post—as Indochina bureau chief, Moscow-based correspondent, foreign editor, national editor, and London bureau chief—as well as his years at PublicAffairs publishing books written by journalists give him a valuable perspective on the topic of reporters and editors who decide to become authors and the publishing industry in the era of e-books. Edited excerpts from their conversation follow:*

digital publishing was really marginal. Now we know it’s very substantial. As far as I can tell, writers are still writing in the traditional way with an awareness that a substantial number of their readers will be reading on digital devices. The content is consistent. What’s changing—and changing quickly—is the means of distribution.

**Ludtke:** You recalled in another article that almost a decade ago writer and futurist Esther Dyson indicated that we no longer live in the information age but in the attention age. You wrote about how writers were becoming marketers of their work. In the news industry’s transformation, journalists have had to learn how to brand themselves by communicating in ways

one of the ways in which people now access information. It used to be that you hoped your book would make it on its merits, with perhaps a boost from a review or two.

Today that’s different. It’s essential that journalists recognize that to truly reach their audience, it is necessary to devote as much attention, time and effort to the promotion of the book and its contents as to its writing. It used to be that all you had to do was get the story, and it was someone else’s job to sell it. That is no longer the case and it makes some authors uncomfortable because they don’t understand the importance of their role in this process.

You’ll notice I haven’t mentioned social media. That, too, is important.



**It’s essential that journalists recognize that to truly reach their audience, it is necessary to devote as much attention, time and effort to the promotion of the book and its contents as to its writing.**

**Melissa Ludtke:** In April you wrote: “Publishing is now undergoing the most significant transformation in the way books are distributed and read since development of high-speed printing presses and the transcontinental rail and highway systems.” If we think of the digital highway as the road that books are traveling on with greater frequency, how do you think this affects those who are writing them?

**Peter Osnos:** It’s too soon to say with certainty. It’s all happening so fast. As recently as 2007—before the Kindle—

that go beyond just doing their work. So when it comes to books, do these skills put them in the driver’s seat?

**Osnos:** It certainly helps to be well-known. And how do you get to be well known? Well, if you’re a journalist, it’s because of where you work. Traditionally it was the major news organizations. Now a lot of journalists are well-known for their multiple platforms—they appear on television, write a blog, may contribute to magazines, and are on the radio. An author gets to be known by communicating in every

Social media is today’s word of mouth. If enough people hear about something and tell other people who are in their network, and they tell others, it spreads that way. Authors can make a significant impact through what amounts to digital word of mouth.

**Ludtke:** At the other end of things, though, there has to be this exercise of judgment in choosing which books actually deserve to be written or supported, as you point out in one of your pieces, because now anyone can write a book and publish it. It’s a question

of whether they're going to get support from a publisher to do it. Do you have ideas to offer journalists about what separates their daily stories from what works well as a book?

**Osnos:** That's a central question. Journalists are familiar with writing in the same way that musicians are familiar with music. But that doesn't automatically translate music into a symphony or a piece of writing into a book. An enduring challenge for journalists is to take their experiences, background and skills as a writer and turn them into a fully developed narrative. I

often find myself saying to would-be authors, "Remember, if you write this for a magazine or a major newspaper or even the significant online news outlets, you're going to probably reach a bigger audience than you would if you write a nonfiction book. Only write a book if you need that kind of length and are truly compelled."

How a book is defined, particularly a digital one, is evolving. Increasingly, we have what are coming to be known as singles—essentially essays written in book form. When a big news story breaks, many major news organizations take what they already have, put it

together, call it a book, and post it through Amazon or on some other digital channels. Book publishers start from the premise that we are not basically the extension of a magazine. Our goal is to find the writers and subjects that justify the range and depth and length that a book should have and that distinguishes it from either short, medium or even, in some instances, magazine-length journalism.

How that content is delivered is what is changing. But the process of producing a coherent, well-argued book is not. Experienced editors still help even the most gifted authors articulate

## Sooner Sounds Better

By Philip Meyer

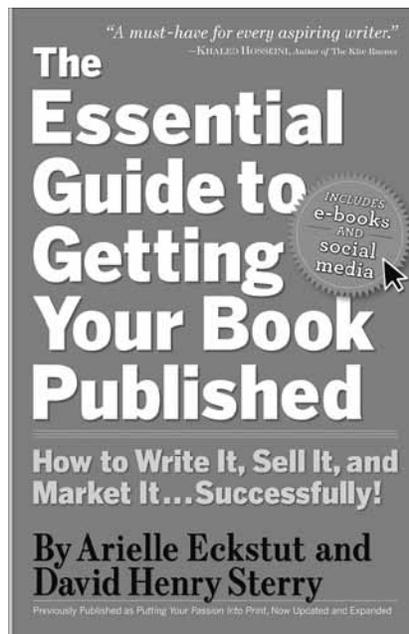
Recently I wrote a memoir with the working title "Paper Route: Finding My Way to Precision Journalism" and then I started looking for a publisher. One of my first stops was the website of Algonquin Books, a boutique publisher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina owned by Workman Publishing Company of New York. It had advice for prospective authors.

"If you'd like more information on what goes into a great book proposal," it said, "click here ..."

The link took me to an excerpt from a title on the Workman list, "The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published: How to Write It, Sell It, and Market It ... Successfully!" by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry. So I bought it.

I found the book, at 481 pages, clear, thorough and convincing. The part I liked best was Chapter 11, "Publish Thyself." Modern technology, with e-books and on-demand publishing, makes assisted self-publishing fast and inexpensive.

Putting the book down, I looked at the calendar. To go the route taken with my previous books, I



would first need to find a publisher willing to read my manuscript. It might take a year to get a decision. If the decision should be favorable, getting from manuscript to a bound volume ready to ship would take another year.

For an author who is 81 years

old, faster is better. So I signed up with iUniverse of Bloomington, Indiana, which will have my book out in paper and e-book by spring. Its plan pays royalties quarterly instead of annually. The modest fee gets me a range of services including editing, cover design, and worldwide distribution.

That's not all. I have a drawer full of old publishing projects that never seemed worth the trouble before but might work now that targeting the narrowest of markets is feasible. Good thing that I'm not too old for a new career. ■

*Philip Meyer, a 1967 Nieman Fellow, is Professor Emeritus in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has written several books including "Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods" and "Ethical Journalism: A Guide for Students, Practitioners, and Consumers."*

their message, and even though digital publishing is pushing 20 percent of the net sales of books, the overwhelming percentage of books are still being published in the traditional way. That number will go down and the digital number will go up, but when you sit down to read on an e-reading device, in most cases you're doing exactly what you would have done had you been holding the book in your hand. You turn electronic pages, stop when you want to, and pick up again where you left off.

The most important thing about the digital reading experience is that it addresses what for a very long time was the major challenge for publishers: How do we give consumers what they want, where they want it, and when they want it? My aphorism for the way publishing operates these days is "Good books. Any way you want them. Now." I think that is the essence of where we are in publishing. It's up to us to choose the books and to enable authors to write the best book they can and then make it available in every way that a consumer could possibly want to read it.

**Ludtke:** Some of the e-books published by news organizations appear to be driven more by there being a market than by their content so they are a vehicle to repurpose content and increase a revenue stream.

**Osnos:** Increasing revenue is a completely legitimate objective. All of us know that in order to function we have to constantly be looking for new forms of revenue and new ways to reach consumers. There was a question as to whether people would read long-form journalism or narrative on devices. For the most part, we've found that the traditional laptop or desktop wasn't a particularly good way to attract people to read at length. Even now lots of people, if they get to a long article that they really want to read, they print it out. I would do that. Maybe it's generational.

After the e-reading devices appeared I accommodated very quickly and read with considerable pleasure. The

best of these devices make reading a completely convenient experience. There's another aphorism appropriate to this age and that is that the two things that people look for are convenience and quality. Now people know they can get the book they want when they want it. That is a formidable asset in how people feel about books; if you hear about a book, see a review, hear an interview, know an author, you don't have to go through the prolonged process of figuring out where to find it.

**Ludtke:** Former New York Times executive editor Bill Keller wrote about journalists and book writing, and you called his tone cranky. When news organizations, specifically the Times, "indulge our writers," Keller wrote, "we do so at a cost. Books mean writers who are absent or distracted from daily journalism, writers who have to be replaced when they leave their reporting beats and landed somewhere when they return." There is, he went on to say, "the tricky relationship between what they unearth for their books and what goes into the paper." And this happened in a noteworthy way with the book that Times investigative reporter James Risen wrote about the CIA and the Bush administration. "There is the awkwardness of reviewing books by colleagues," Keller continued. "There is the resentment of those left behind to take up the slack." Do you think Keller has a valid point?

**Osnos:** Absolutely. "Where you stand depends on where you sit," and as the paper's executive editor he'd see a writer come in and say, "I've just been working on this story for the last year for you, and now I want to take time and go off and write a book about it." That creates problems for him. Whether that means that journalists shouldn't write books in general, which is what he goes on to argue, that's another issue. I don't agree with him on that score at all.

Newspaper and magazine editors need to accept the fact that the people who work for them will have the natural inclination to want to take a story and

spin it out. Keller identified all of the major problems that editors have when their reporters go off to tell a story at greater length. This will always be the case. Increasingly, as more journalists feel that their role at the newspaper or magazine or their day job is a platform, they will want other means of reaching an audience and will do that through books. An extraordinary number of good journalists are eager to write books, and whether they will depends on whether they can find a publisher and if they have the energy to move through the process.

**Ludtke:** In writing about e-books you observed that Amazon's long-term intention is to condition consumers to the lowest possible price. At a time when paywalls are being put into place at some newspapers, there remains the belief among many that news wants to be free. So there is a question of how reporting will be paid for both in newsrooms and in supporting the journalist in the time needed to report and write meaningful nonfiction books.

**Osnos:** As I said, this is a dynamic process. It has moved very quickly. In a bit more than a decade we have reinvented the way information is distributed. We've been here before. Between the late 1940's and early '60's television went through multiple stages. A curious feature of network television is that it was always advertiser supported. Buy a TV and watch it. Then came the cable system; now you buy a TV, but also pay your cable provider that in turn pays people who create the content. This happened in essentially a generation.

We're going through that now with books and, to some extent, news. The thing to remember about books is that we never had advertising as a revenue stream so unlike news that's not an issue for us. Nor did we really have subscribers. For book publishers the issue always was whether we could manage inventory: Can we put books where they need to be when the consumer wants them? It is a considerable virtue that we now can do this—giving the reader options

about how they want to read it and at what cost. Inventory management is not exactly a glamorous concept but it is essential in the way that book publishing has evolved.

**Ludtke:** You sound optimistic about the plethora of platforms at different price points adding up to something that will be able to pay for the kind of reporting time needed to produce serious nonfiction books.

**Osnos:** Yes. Book publishing, like every other part of the information and entertainment industry, is running as fast as it can to learn how to best accommodate what is essentially a transformation in the way books are read. When we talk with a potential author, we have to take into account the various ways in which that book will be sold. Will the author be available to promote the book? Will there be a natural constituency for it? Will the author be willing to do what amounts to going door to door?

**Ludtke:** If we were to move four years into the future—to 2015—and take

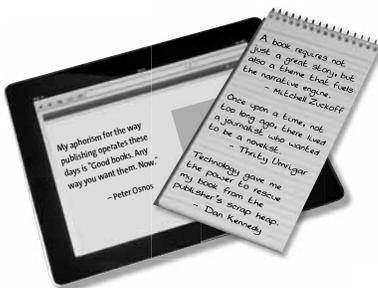
I don't know. Will people want to have material that they could have had in previous formats just because at the moment it's particularly interesting? We don't know. In a few cases short books about something very much in the news worked, such as Jon Krakauer's "Three Cups of Deceit," which was initially available as a promotional download but continues to sell on Byliner for \$2.99, and Christopher Hitchens's "The Enemy," an essay on the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, that sells for \$1.99.

In my 27 years or so in publishing, I've seen transformations, one after another—from the bookstore model to the online retailer and now virtual distribution. I don't expect this to stop. But the publisher is obliged to serve the consumer in all the ways that the consumer wants to be served. The good news is that the consumer has more options. We have the Kindle, the Nook, the iPad, and there's more coming. And with each of these innovations, we see the reading public making choices. Most e-books are now available through multiple retailers and on several devices so

more power in the choice of format and the means of distribution than they did a generation ago.

**Ludtke:** What if we substitute the word "journalists" for "consumers" in your last statement? It's true that they also have more choices in producing what they have to say at different lengths. There might have been a choice before between sticking with their daily job and taking the material to a full-length book. Now reporters might have more choice about what they produce.

**Osnos:** Absolutely. I think you will find that Politico's joint venture with Random House in publishing e-books is a new model of what Newsweek used to do: they would embed reporters with candidates to collect information. Within days after the election, Newsweek would produce what essentially was a book-length magazine. In the last two election cycles, PublicAffairs took those magazines, which were almost book-length, augmented them however we could in the time frame we had, and published them. That Newsweek no longer exists. The partnership



**The gatekeeper role of a publisher is still significant, still essential to the publishing process, with the judgment of an experienced editor and the marketing skills of a good publisher. But consumers have much more power in the choice of format and the means of distribution than they did a generation ago.**

what we know today, do you think that we'll have book publishers in the sense we do now and that journalists will go to them and get advances to support their reporting?

**Osnos:** Oh, yes. I don't think there's any question about it. Now we have various experiments. The concept of the "Let me take repurposed material and sell it as a book through an online retailer" is an experiment. Will it work?

publishers are doing their best to track the exact number of copies sold. But some books sell significantly more copies in digital versions than they do in a print version because that's what the consumer wants.

The gatekeeper role of a publisher is still significant, still essential to the publishing process, with the judgment of an experienced editor and the marketing skills of a good publisher. But consumers have much

between Politico and Random House is for short e-books to be published during the course of the campaign. The assumption is that in today's world readers want to know what is going on in real time rather than waiting for post-election analysis. This is a vivid example of how publishing has adapted to demand. ■

# Telling Political Stories in Closer to Real-Time Books

‘The digital book project is a way of ensuring that these tips and anecdotes and character insights don’t get pushed aside, and instead are developed and given to readers in a format that puts them in the best light.’

By JOHN F. HARRIS

As a once and I hope future author, I’ll confess that in certain moods a bleak scenario can cross my mind. Just my luck, and that of other journalists of my generation, that a good nearly six-century run in the publishing business might be about to perish—the victim of changes in technology and audience tastes—at the very moment we are ready to write.

These fears—like many anxieties that people comfortable with familiar paths hold about disruptive technologies—may prove overwrought. With luck, one hopes, in retrospect they will even come to seem ridiculous.

And yet there is no denying that the digital era has not on balance been a friend to long-form narrative. The historic shift has weakened daily newspapers, imperiled some fine magazines, and seems likely to be in the early stages of launching a similar upheaval in the book publishing industry. It is not just business models that are changing. The proliferation of information—abetted by the omnipresence of devices to carry that information to us at all times and in all settings—at times seems to be affecting the very nature of the human mind and its capacity for the sustained concentration that lengthy articles and books demand. One friend adapts with a self-imposed rule about paragraphs in the modern age: Never longer than can appear in a single BlackBerry screen. Months of

The screenshot shows the POLITICO Bookshelf interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs: 2012 LIVE, 44, CONGRESS, CLICK, ARENA, OPINION, POLICY, and VIDEO. Below this is the 'BOOKSHELF' header with the tagline 'POLITICS COVER TO COVER'. A search bar is present with the text 'Search the POLITICO Bookshelf' and a search icon. The main content area features a 'Featured Topics' sidebar on the left with categories like 'New & Noteworthy', '2012 Race: The Players', 'Books from Congress', 'Debt & Deficit', 'For Our Veterans', 'Categories', 'All Books', 'Biographies & Memoirs', 'Bookshelf For Kids', 'Business & Economics', and 'Foreign Policy & Security'. The central focus is the book 'Playbook 2012: The Right Fights Back (Politico Inside Election 2012)' by Mike Allen and Evan Thomas. The book cover is displayed, showing the title 'THE RIGHT FIGHTS BACK' and the authors' names. To the right of the book, it says 'Pre-Order this eBook Available at \$2.99' and lists the retailers: Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, and the iBookstore. At the bottom of the book section, there are links for 'Overview' and 'About The Author'.

Politico and Random House are joining forces to publish a series of e-books about the 2012 campaign. “The Right Fights Back” is the first.

enterprise reporting may never find an audience unless it can be cleverly reduced to 140 characters on Twitter in the hope of going viral.

Now I am starting to sound like something I and my colleagues at Politico have vowed not to be—pessimists. As journalists, the group of us who joined five years ago to start a publication devoted to national politics and the workings of Washington made a very purposeful decision that we would not live our journalism careers in a defensive crouch, besieged by unwanted change, longing nostalgically for some rapidly receding golden age. To the contrary, Politico has found editorial and business success by embrac-

ing technological change and trying vigorously to dominate a niche: content aimed at people who share our intense, even obsessive, interest in politics. Optimism is partly a matter of willpower, but it is partly a rational response to a media marketplace that by our estimate has opened plentiful new opportunities even as it has narrowed others.

## Partnering With Random House

Politico is now in the early stages of a collaboration with Random House that reflects the spirit of innovation that we believe is a signature of the publication. The assignment is to produce short digital books—in the range of 20,000 words or so—that will be written in serial fashion.

Mike Allen, our senior reporter and cofounder of Politico, will do the reporting for these books and co-write them with veteran magazine writer Evan Thomas. During his career at Newsweek, Thomas was the chief writer for many of the magazine’s special issues—some of which were expanded into books—that took readers behind the scenes of presidential campaigns immediately after the election. Our aim is to replicate many of the elements of those books—the vivid portraits of personality, the crises, and the calculations over strategy—and tell these stories in something closer to real time. The first e-book in the Playbook 2012 series, “The Right Fights Back,” was

published at the end of November.

This is unquestionably an experiment. We'll consider it a success, on the belief that we'll learn something along the way, no matter how the experiment turns out. But we have two reasons for suspecting it will turn out well. One reason is based on concrete knowledge; the other is based on a hunch.

The concrete knowledge is that Politico reporters, and Allen especially, learn more and know more from their reporting than they can ever possibly share with readers through traditional stories on the website. Often the morsels that are in our heads and in our notebooks are tantalizing—crying out for a little more reporting and context to be put in usable form—and yet they get pushed aside in the flood of daily business. The digital book project is a way of ensuring that these tips and anecdotes and character insights don't get pushed aside, and instead are developed and given to readers in a format that puts them in the best light.

Our hunch is that the cycle is about to turn and that long-form nonfiction storytelling is about to have a

rebirth in the digital age. Certainly Politico has made its contribution to the trend toward brevity, speed and monomania for the story of the day or even the hour. We are proud of this. These traits are exactly right for certain kinds of stories. Yet as the Web has matured it is harder to stand out through these things alone. The competitive field becomes ever more crowded and intense.

The way to get noticed is to go deeper—to use our sources and our expertise to produce news that competitors would be hard-pressed to match through hustle alone. There will be a new premium, not on length for its own sake, but on the depth necessary to tell original stories in an arresting fashion. People do not want more bursts of data but more orientation—and a more intimate human understanding—of the barrage of news all around them.

The new technologies—iPads and Kindles and other tablet devices—also make the reading experience more absorbing and more congenial for long-form journalism.

A key figure in the Politico/Random

House partnership is Jon Meacham, a senior editor with Random House and, of course, a veteran magazine editor and successful nonfiction author. He prodded Politico to join Random House in this e-book experiment.

Meacham and I are kindred spirits in key respects. We both grew up in the old order—in which big established media brands like Newsweek and The Washington Post prospered and had formidable power to set the national agenda. And we both feel the same generational imperative to find a good answer to the critical question “What's next?” at a time when the old order is strained in most cases and has crumbled altogether in others.

What do people want in this frenetic digital age? After everything, my guess is that they want good stories, just as people have always yearned for them and presumably always will. That prospect seems like grounds for optimism to me. ■

*John F. Harris is the editor in chief of Politico.*

## E-Books as a Business Strategy

Owني ‘doesn't carry advertisements and publishes all of its content under a Creative Commons license. Selling products—including e-books—is its *big bet*.’

BY FEDERICA COCCO

Visit Owني.fr and adjacent to its logo, among French words and enticing graphics, is its English tagline: News, Augmented. The words reflect the website's ambitious spirit, its dictum, and manifesto: to present news with an added layer of digital bonuses—maps and apps and interactive infographics. An intriguing red circle on a tiny pull string hangs from the top of our homepage. Scroll over the circle and the OwنيShop logo appears.

Move it away, and the logo vanishes.

This understated, almost coy advertising strategy mirrors Owني's tentative e-book sales strategy. Though e-book sales in France are rapidly picking up, especially with the Kindle store opening this past October, Owني is the first media outlet in France to sell e-books as part of its core editorial output.

The Owني website features augmented and data-driven stories and investigations. Blogger and Web

entrepreneur Nicolas Voisin founded Owني in 2009 at a time when bloggers were involved in a massive campaign against France's passage of the anti-piracy HADOPI law involving copyright issues. With Owني, he created a platform for the blogging community and he hired staff to oversee the content, its presentation, and its distribution. The website's editorial focus is promoting freedom of expression.

Like other websites in France, Owني

receives a government subsidy and brings in some money through fundraising. Voisin's Web agency 22Mars, founded in 2006, takes in revenue from the sale of various products related to Owni, including apps, online platforms, interactive maps, and infographics. Yet none of these items sells enough to make a profit. Will selling e-books make a difference? It's too soon to know.

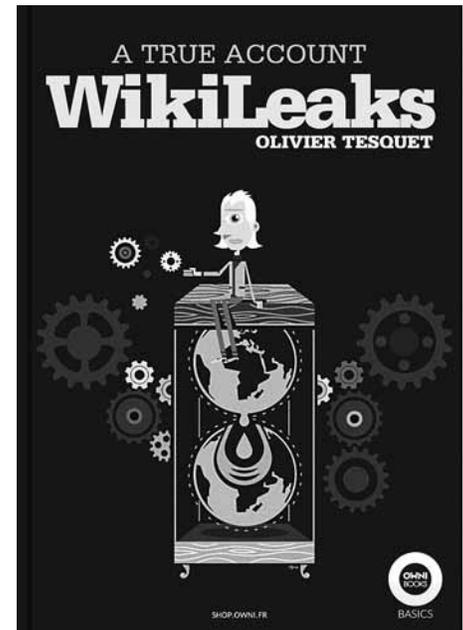
Finding adequate revenue to sustain their work is proving difficult for digital outlets, especially those with a focus on news. Owni struggles with this issue; it doesn't carry advertisements and publishes all of its content under a Creative Commons license. Selling products—including e-books—is its *big bet*.

"This strategy has just begun," says Owni cofounder, editor and reporter Guillaume Ledit. It began as a result of two developments. At the start of 2011, Guillaume Dasquet was hired as the site's editor in chief. A freelance investigative reporter with experience in long-form journalism, he had worked for the French publisher Flammarion, where he was in charge of putting together and publishing collections of nonfiction from 2005 to 2007. The second motivating event was the release

of a book about WikiLeaks, written by Owni's former chief political reporter Olivier Tesquet, who obtained rights to publish the book in a digital format. In April 2011 "La Véritable Histoire de WikiLeaks" ("WikiLeaks: A True Account") became the first e-book to be sold in the OwniShop, priced at a bit less than four euros (or \$5.50).

## Selling E-Books

OwniShop has released only four e-books for sale. In December 2010 Owni created 10 e-books that were collections of essays and articles originally published on the website and gave them to loyal readers. While the idea of selling e-books does seem forward-thinking, it is not revealing itself as a cash cow. "This is merely our initial foray," Ledit is quick to say. But if a measure of success is OwniShop's social media impact, then it has not been an impressive debut. Since April the online shop has gained just 95 followers on Twitter and 85 fans on Facebook. Though the company has not disclosed exact sales figures, Ledit admits that "so far we are not making any profit. In fact, we're looking more at losses."



Owni's first e-book.

What is now an unprofitable short-term venture might turn out to be successful in the long term. Despite the low number of e-book sales, confidence in this strategy has led Owni to adjust its editorial work and set new profit targets. The website now publishes fewer daily news stories and directs more of its resources toward production of e-books. Owni published two e-books in November—one on the French presidential elections and another on network surveillance.

Another outcome of Owni's editorial shift has been a considerable broadening in its scope of topics. Along with Owni e-books about net neutrality, WikiLeaks, French politics, and an account of the antipiracy law, Owni published an e-book—available in French and English—called "Rugby Stories." Sylvain Lapoix, Owni's chief political and environmental reporter, explained the choice of rugby as an e-book: "This was a test. We picked a topic that was trending in the news; we saw it as an opportunity to do a good 'design' job. It's a one-shot tryout," he said.

"We are banking on the fact that the market in France will be ready in a few years, and we want to be seen as the first digital editor for digital cultures," Dasquet explained. "Our



The e-books published by Owni, a news website based in France, focus on the site's core issues of technology, privacy and piracy, yet experiment with other subjects.

news staff consists of 12 journalists, all of whom are committed to writing an e-book covering the topic on which they have been specializing.” Between November 2011 and July 2012, Owni expects to publish 12 e-books, all of them written in-house. Dasquiet said, “The whole strategy can be seen as a way to re-center our objective: we are a part of the company, 22Mars, but we have a specific expertise.”

Owni’s e-books are embellished by the work of French graphic artist Loguy, who has given Owni’s stories

a distinct look from the beginning. He infused Tesquet’s book about WikiLeaks with infographics and beguiling illustrations. Owni plans to “include an element of interactivity to its e-books by fully exploiting new Web tools such as HTML5,” Ledit told me. What this will mean in a time of DRM-protected, static e-book file formats remains to be seen.

For now Owni, as a website, plows a lone furrow in France’s burgeoning digital publishing market. Outside of France, the likes of Ars Technica and

The Huffington Post are also testing this strategy. However, without the financial resources of juggernauts such as Condé Nast and AOL, Owni risks turning its independently funded guinea pig into a victim of the digital revolution. ■

*Federica Cocco, a freelance journalist, is the founder and former editor of Owni.eu, Owni’s English language sister website.*

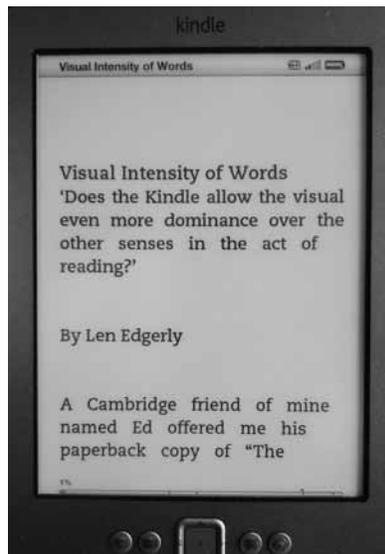
## Visual Intensity of Words

‘Does the Kindle allow the visual even more dominance over the other senses in the act of reading?’

BY LEN EDGERLY

**A** Cambridge friend of mine named Ed offered me his paperback copy of “The Namesake” by Jhumpa Lahiri this summer. I held up my hand to decline and then reached for a note card in my pocket to write the title down so I could buy the Kindle version. “I don’t read that way any more,” I heard myself tell Ed, who seemed as surprised as I was that this could be true.

Though I have started reading several books in print over the four years since I bought my first Kindle in December 2007, I have only completed one of them. By the summer of 2008 I’d become so excited about the Kindle experience that I started to host a weekly podcast called “The Kindle Chronicles.” Doing this show has enabled me to talk e-books with close to 200 guests so far—among them journalists (James Fallows and Andy Ihnatko), authors (Steven Pressfield and Nicholson Baker), Amazon executives, kids, technologists and marketing consultants. One guest has been my wife Darlene, who reads many more books on her Kindle than I do on mine and who, except for her Kindle,



The author uses his Kindle’s fourth-largest font to read. Photo courtesy of Len Edgerly.

loathes technology.

I buy and read more books than I did before the Kindle. I enjoy reading more than ever. That much I know. The only book that I’ve read on paper since December 2007 is Calvin Trillin’s “Remembering Denny,” a poignant memoir of his Yale classmate, a man

who seemingly had everything but ended up taking his own life. A friend of mine pressured me into reading the book, even though it wasn’t available on the Kindle. He thought I was being stubborn about this e-book thing. Maybe he’s right, I thought. Maybe I will enjoy a great book just as much on paper as I do on the calming, reflective screen of the Kindle. So I read Trillin’s book cover to cover, proving to myself that I really did prefer reading on a Kindle.

I was glad I had taken up my friend’s challenge because it made me more conscious of how my reading has changed, and why. Let’s start with how big the type is in print books versus Kindle versions. I am 61 years old, and I’m using the fourth-largest font on my Kindle. It’s a lot bigger than the font in any of the print books that I own. This alone makes reading easier for me.

Beyond this obvious benefit to my reading, the changes get more subjective. In my experience, they add up to something like a second honeymoon in my lifelong love affair with books.

One thing you’ll notice about how

people talk about their Kindle (or Nook, Sony Reader, or Kobo) is how often they use the word “love.” As my wife’s example demonstrates, this is not because they are all gadget hounds. When Darlene says she loves her Kindle, it’s not the graphite-colored plastic or the e-ink screen she’s talking about. It’s *reading this way* that she loves.

## Words on a Screen

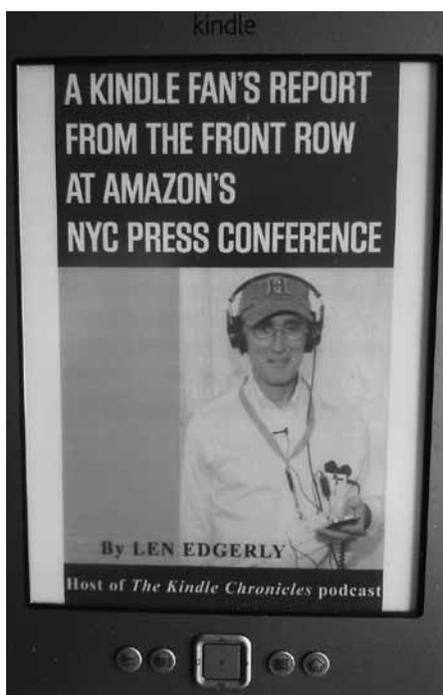
What’s more difficult to describe is how these new platforms are changing reading. Authors will benefit from pondering this question because an increasing share of their readers will read them the way I now do.

As I mull how my own reading has changed, I wish Marshall McLuhan was still around. I believe he would have seen reading via e-ink technology as a further intensification of its visual dimension. As he pointed out in “The Gutenberg Galaxy,” the transition from manuscripts to print strengthened the visual experience 500 years ago. “It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses,” he wrote.

Is that what’s happening now? Does the Kindle allow the visual even more dominance over the other senses in the act of reading?

Consider how print book lovers make the case against e-books. What do they miss most? The *feel* of the book, even the *smell* of the book. Each physical book feels and maybe smells slightly different. On the Kindle, a book is distilled to nothing but the words that the author chose, in the order he or she placed them.

On a Kindle, the font will be exactly the same as that of every other book, subject only to the reader’s preference for serif (Caecilia) or sans serif (Helvetica) type. With the size I use, 87 words appeared on the screen where I



Len Edgerly follows Kindle developments.

*Photo by John Marshall Mantel.*

found that quote from McLuhan’s “The Gutenberg Galaxy.” On a page of his better-known work, “Understanding

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**... follow me one step further in the development  
of my theory about how e-books change reading.  
I feel closer to the author when I read his or her  
work in an e-book.**

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Media: The Extensions of Man”—not available on Kindle, so a year ago I bought a paper copy that I haven’t finished yet—a single page contains approximately 350 words.

This difference intensifies the visual impact of the words. Each word or sentence arrives in my mind through my eyes with less peripheral distraction from other words and sentences.

If you are with me so far, then follow me one step further in the development of my theory about how e-books change reading. I feel *closer* to the author when I read his or her

work in an e-book.

We are deep into subjective experience here, but I can report on at least one test of my impression. I have alternated between reading McLuhan’s “The Gutenberg Galaxy” on my Kindle and his “Understanding Media” on paper. On paper, he feels further away, as if he had written a brilliant thesis decades ago, and I found a dusty copy of it in my attic. He is no longer in the room. But on the Kindle, it’s as if he’s passing along his words to me as he’s writing them, fewer than 100 of them at a time. It feels *personal*. McLuhan is not an easy read, and I do a lot better keeping up with his puns and swirling insights when I’m seeing his words on a Kindle screen.

If what I sense in using the Kindle is a shared reading experience, and if you are working on a book now, expect that many of the readers of your book will have a more intimate experience of your words than was possible before. Imagine they are in the room where you are writing because that’s how it will feel to them. Be careful. Be personal. And for goodness’ sake,

hunt and kill every single typo. I find that they shout at me from the page of an e-book, whereas on paper they are merely irritating.

Because of new technology, people are reading in a new way. It may take another McLuhan or another 500 years before we really understand how

this change will affect our modes of awareness. Meanwhile, write a book as if it will matter more to readers than ever. Thanks to e-books, I believe it will. ■

*Len Edgerly created “The Kindle Chronicles” podcast after retiring from journalism and as a natural gas company executive. He cofounded ebooksfortroops.org, a nonprofit that distributes Kindles to U.S. military units on active duty in Afghanistan and Iraq.*

## Out of Print, a Book Reappears—And Earns Its Author Money

‘Because of the Internet and some very slick printing technology, “Little People” remains visible and available. It’s even making me money for the first time since 2002 ...’

BY DAN KENNEDY

The fate of my first book—a memoir about raising a daughter with dwarfism—was not unusual for an obscure title by an equally obscure author. There was the day that the publishing house was convinced Oprah had agreed to book me. She hadn’t. And there was the day that the publicity folks congratulated me after they’d heard *The New York Times* Book Review would soon weigh in. Their good wishes proved premature.

So despite favorable reviews in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Boston Globe* as well as some attention from NPR and elsewhere, “Little People: Learning to See the World Through My Daughter’s Eyes” soon faded away. The book was published in 2003. By 2008, when my publisher, Rodale, pulled the plug, it had sold a shade under 1,600 copies—not terrible, but nothing to make anyone sit up and take notice, either.

As I learned, though, there is such a thing as life after death, at least in the publishing world. Because of the Internet and some very slick printing technology, “Little People” remains visible and available. It’s even making me money for the first time since 2002, when my agent, Andrew Blauner, sold the book to Rodale in exchange for a nice advance.

The comeback of “Little People” began with my decision to post it on the Web. Rodale had taken the essential steps of reassigning the rights to me and e-mailing me the PDFs, which I converted to HTML files and uploaded. I was especially pleased to be able to fix a grammatical error that had been bugging me for years. The



site—to which I attached a Creative Commons license, allowing anyone to redistribute my work as long as they credited me and didn’t try to profit from it—went live in the summer of 2008. The online version was free and came with the offer of a signed hardcover to anyone who wanted to buy a copy from my own dwindling supply. I sold maybe two dozen over the next two years.

### Self-Publishing

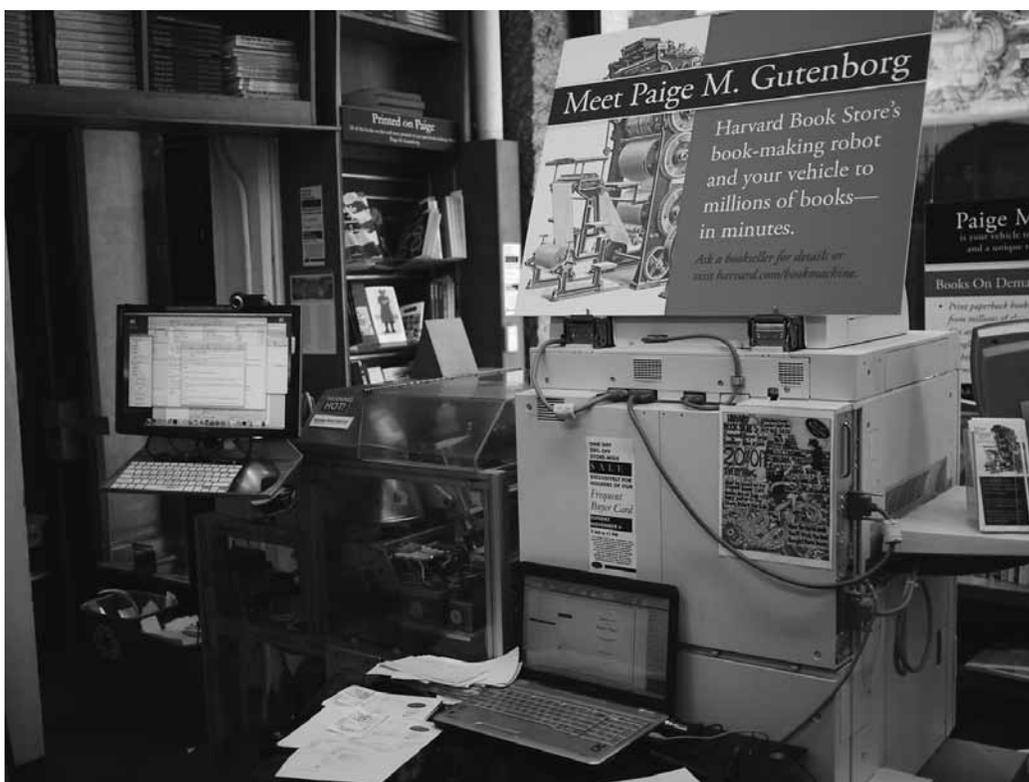
In the spring of 2010, I received a message from Doug Haskell, the head of the English department at the high school in my hometown of Middleborough, Massachusetts. He told me that someone at the school

had seen my website and remembered I was from Middleborough. He and his fellow teachers were considering making “Little People” that year’s summer read, and he wanted to know if I was willing to drive down and discuss it with students during the following school year.

I didn’t have to be asked twice. But I quickly discovered there was a problem. Haskell didn’t want people to have to read an entire book online, and he asked me if there were enough books available. I scanned Amazon.com and other online sources of used books, and I learned that “Little People” was on the verge of extinction. What to do?

I decided to self-publish a new edition. At first, I considered going with an Internet service such as Lulu, as my friend Dan Gillmor did with his book “Mediactive” [See Gillmor’s “Figuring Out What a 21st Century Book Can Be,” *Nieman Reports*, Winter 2010]. But though I’m sure Lulu would have done a fine job, I gravitated to the Harvard Book Store in Cambridge’s Harvard Square, which had its own self-publishing operation with the too-cute name of Paige M. Gutenberg. Being able to drive to the store and talk with people face to face was important given that it was all new to me.

Bronwen Blaney, who was then in charge of the store’s self-publishing services, skillfully guided me through the process. I wrote a new introduction and assembled the book as one long PDF, with a separate PDF for the cover. I tracked down the photographer who had shot the original cover image, Tsar Fedorsky, who kindly agreed to let me reuse it in return for a credit



Using Harvard Book Store's Espresso Book Machine—playfully named “Paige M. Gutenberg”—Dan Kennedy was able to revive his book “Little People.” *Photo by Jonathan Seitz.*

and a link to her website. No special software was necessary. I paid my \$70 setup fee, and we were off and running.

Sales from Middleborough that summer were brisk, but I did not keep good records. So on a recent visit to the Harvard Book Store, Linden Marno-Ferree, the current self-publishing manager, helped me work through the numbers. As of this past October, the store had sold 132 copies at \$16 each, the cover price I had set. I received \$4.72 per copy. On top of that, I had purchased 80 copies at a bulk discount of 10 percent. Of those, I had sold 60 to a bookstore in Middleborough at a discount and had kept 20 for myself. I can't tell you exactly how much I made, but I'd say it was somewhere between \$750 and \$800.

The mechanical process itself is fascinating, but there's not much to see when it's actually taking place. At my request, Marno-Ferree printed a copy of “Little People.” The pages were spit out of a Xerox 4112 photocopier and into the back of an Espresso Book Machine, manufactured by On Demand

Books. I watched carefully as the pages were glued to the cover, made of heavy, semi-glossy stock, then cut to size. It took about seven minutes from start to finish. The book-making was controlled by both a Windows and a Macintosh computer, though I confess I'm not sure which did what. Self-published books by more than 100 authors are available through the Harvard Book Store, Marno-Ferree told me.

A final note: Technology saved “Little People,” but recent advances may be undermining sales. My original idea of giving it away online and selling physical copies of the book was based on the notion that few people would want to sit in front of a computer and read an 80,000-word book.

Not long ago, however, I borrowed my wife's iPad and accessed the “Little People” website. As I suspected, the reading experience was pretty comfortable, and I'm not sure what incentive someone might have to buy a copy. I could remove the text of the book from the website and put together paid versions for the Kindle, the Nook, and

Apple's iBooks. But not only would that take time, it would also defeat my original goal of making “Little People” freely available.

Last spring I talked about “Little People” to several hundred students at Middleborough High School. They asked good questions. I tried to answer them. It was a rewarding experience. And it wouldn't have been possible if technology hadn't given me the power to rescue my book from the publisher's scrap heap. I never expected to get rich from “Little People.” It's enough that the book is still alive eight years after it stumbled out of the gate. ■

*Dan Kennedy is an assistant professor of journalism at Northeastern University. He is a panelist on “Beat the Press” on WGBH-TV in Boston and a contributing writer for The Guardian. His book “Little People: Learning to See the World Through My Daughter's Eyes” is online at [www.littlepeoplethebook.com](http://www.littlepeoplethebook.com).*

# Journalist to Marketer—With a Book In-Between

‘... being a great reporter is no guarantee that you can successfully sell your book, even when you’ve done cool stories about books.’

BY ROCHELLE LEFKOWITZ

I’ve never met a journalist who doesn’t have an idea for a book. But I do know many who would rather think up names for lipsticks than say, text and e-mail, again and again, these words (or ones like them): “There’s this *fascinating* author of a new book whom I know you’d love to interview.”

“Who?”

“Me!”

Yet this—and much more—is what it takes to effectively publicize your book.

Even after more than 25 years of working hard running a social issue communications firm, where I prod journalists to talk, write, blog and tweet, among other things, about serious nonfiction books, I’d be hard-pressed to reduce what I do to a science, let alone to 10 tips. But I do have some pointers to share.

These days as books migrate from paper to pixels, as publishing and journalism undergo seismic shifts, as we’re more linked but less loyal to authors, publishers, reviewers or booksellers, getting your book into the right hands, screens, hearts and minds demands as much energy and creativity as conceiving and writing it. Seriously. So pacing is vital—from writing that first word to selling every book you can.

Journalists typically receive a small advance (especially on a first book), and most don’t have a trust fund. There are precious few grants for authors to buy time to sell their books so a promotion budget is

often out of reach. Hence, the first rules of thumb:

- Put only a third of your time, sweat and smarts into writing your book.
- Save, then spend the remaining two-thirds of all three to figure out for whom you wrote your book and how to reach them.
- Resist the temptation to ask all your best-known pals to write blurbs for your book jacket since she who blurbs a book will not be able to review it.

Already I hear a grumbling chorus. With your day job as commerce, the book is often something else—your dream, your sweet revenge, your word sculpture, perhaps your legacy. But to get folks besides your family, students and Facebook friends to buy it requires a key shift in thinking from the start. Just as success in business doesn’t lead automatically to effective philanthropy, being a great reporter is no guarantee that you can successfully sell your book, even when you’ve done cool stories about books.

For one thing, most journalists I know are buyers, not sellers. Sure, you need to sell stories to your editors or executive producers and get sources to tell you theirs. But most journalists I’ve worked with like to ask the questions, not answer them. To promote your book effectively, you must successfully make that role reversal.

Complex and far from formulaic, until recently your job as a journalist ended when you turned in your copy, audio or video. Others worked to get your stories to an audience. Now, with social media and the multiplatform tug of podcasts, YouTube and webcasts, each one of us is expected to be media and message savvy. This turns out to be good training for successfully promoting books.

Some journalists believe that being in the business is an advantage for marketing their books. After all, know-

*Cover Story*

**The Immortal Book Tour**  
BY REBECCA SKLOOT

A month ago, I'd have thought the idea of organizing my own book tour with the help of my brain-damaged father was nuts. My father, Floyd Skloot, has written several books about the neurologic damage he suffered from a virus in the '80s—it affected his memory, his abstract reasoning, and his ability to think about multiple things at once. Exactly the abilities a person needs to envision and organize a book tour. And I'm no better. Somewhere between writing a book, taking a teaching job, freelancing, and becoming my own publicist, things got a bit out of control. My office floor is piled with papers, my inbox has thousands of unanswered e-mails, and I scramble to keep up.

My publisher has been hugely supportive of my book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, so I figured my tour was a given. I fantasized about driving cross country with the boyfriend, our dogs, and a herd of our closest friends in a big tour bus with bright colored cells painted all over it (yes, cells, the things in your body). Then I went to my first publicity meeting. The people at Crown, my publishing house, said, "We don't really do book tours anymore," and "They're just not the best investment of publicity funds." My agent agreed. They explained cost-benefit ratios and said their money was better spent on banner ads, buzz campaigns, and bookstore placement. Instead of talking about a tour bus covered with cells, they talked of blogs and satellite radio tours, of Twittering and Facebooking to interact with readers. I listened and agreed; it all made perfect sense. Then I went home and thought, *but I still want to go on a book tour*. Everyone I know in publishing says book tours are dead. One friend, a bestselling novelist, e-mailed me the other day, saying she'd just finished what would be her last tour ever. She had just one word for it: "heartbreaker." But I don't believe all tours are dead, just the old-fashioned kind, where publishers organize events and writers simply show up hoping for a room full of people. I agree that social networking and online campaigns are the most important tools in book publicity. But I don't see book tours and the online world as separate entities. Rather than replacing tours, I believe the new virtual world of book publicity can help keep them alive.

22 PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ■ NOVEMBER 9, 2009

Moving from a journalist’s mindset to a promoter’s requires a major shift in thinking. Rebecca Skloot, who is not a client of Lefkowitz, made the shift on her own, with enormous success.

ing the editors, reporters, producers and bloggers whom publicists spend hours to reach ought to be a plus, as should knowing how news organizations work. But here's the catch: Did you ever try to get your editor to let you write a feature story about a book or interview a peer as an expert, only to get shot down with "if it was such a good story, why didn't you write it for us?" Though I love pitching serious midlist books by journalists, for just this reason, it's often more, not less, challenging.

## The Sales Job

Moving from a journalist's mindset to an author's to a promoter's requires conscious shifts in thinking. As this happens, a lot can change—and for the better. Usually I break up each book's publicity campaign that Pro-Media creates into three parts: pre-publication, book launch, and post-launch.

Lead time is the key to success. Best results happen when the buzz starts to build three to six months before a book is published. This is the time to start writing op-eds and blog posts—for your blog and as a guest writer on others. Find news pegs like new films or minor holidays. One of my favorites is August 26, the anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States. No, not everyone's away and unplugged before Labor Day anymore. Besides, links can be forwarded and cross-posted for months.

Run a fine-tooth comb through your book to mine it for stories. Yes, you want to sell your entire book, but shorter stories are there to be found and used to promote the whole. Friends can help pick three to five enticing tidbits to highlight. Sometimes the best story is on page 79. Go with it. Your goal is to convince potential readers that they want to buy your book.

It takes a village (online and off) to get traction for your book. Early on, set up Google Alerts with your name and the book's title, and then have pals help you track where your op-eds, blogs, features and reviews get picked up. Alert the press office at your employer and college about



Publicist Rochelle Lefkowitz still uses the telephone to pitch books by her clients.

*Photo by Felix Kramer.*

your book's title and publication date. Don't stop there. Give op-ed editors exclusive pieces with several weeks of lead time. Create or update your author page on Amazon and your bio on Wikipedia. Have a friend take a new and flattering headshot.

Though most major daily book review sections are long gone, some former editors have websites that fans still consult; add them (via Google) to your press list. Make and keep your media lists current, and know who prefers voicemail, text, e-mail, Twitter or Facebook. I still call, not just click, mostly early in the day. Though the days of thick, multipart press kits to launch books are long gone, I still send an occasional snail mail; since all of us receive so little of it, a handwritten note stands out. Write a quick, tight pitch paragraph, let a friend tear it apart, and send it to another colleague to read, cold. Practice a three-minute interview with a pal who will give honest feedback and record it.

Do all of this and more before the book is published.

For your book launch, be sure the subject line sings on e-mails you send about your book. Remember that these words are the only thing between a possible interview and the

delete key. Clear two to three weeks a few months in advance for a launch window, and be sure your boss knows you'll need two full weeks of vacation then. Don't forget FM radio; sure, it's low tech but many of your potential readers listen while commuting or working out. Be sure to say the name of your book once or twice in every interview. Use humor!

Self-publishing is gaining traction among some journalists. Others believe that traditional publishers still give books distribution and marketing muscle. If you go with a publisher, watch out for who owns first and second serial rights. If you retain them, pick two or three strong excerpts from your book and try to get them published. Publications online and off crave free copy. Yes, you are giving away words you'd otherwise sell, but that's part of book promotion.

When your book is out, act on your mom's advice; send lots of e-mails with a simple two-word subject line: "Thank you." Offer to write more guest blogs. Get pals to "review" your book on Amazon or to add their comments when blog posts or articles are written about it. When a piece about your book is published, send it immediately to broadcast producers. Instead of identifying yourself as a journalist, identify yourself on e-mails as the author of your book, at least for the year after its publication.

So, quick, how many journalists does it take to effectively promote a book? If you can't afford to pay a seasoned, creative publicist, then it takes two (preferably both of whom are book authors) so you can swap contact lists of peers to whom to pitch each other's books. Oh, and when you next hear from a publicist trying to flog a book, please resist the impulse to hang up. Instead, hear her out—and learn from her. ■

*Rochelle Lefkowitz is founder and president of Pro-Media Communications, a 25-year-old social issue communications firm with offices in New York City and Redwood City, California. Its website is [www.promediacomm.com](http://www.promediacomm.com).*

## Making a Book—Digital and Print—From Scratch

‘By building a book in modules—rather than constructing it as a complete “bible”—I can gain flexibility, respond easily to the rapid pace of changes, and be happier than if I have to rewrite my entire book.’

BY ELIZABETH CASTRO

When Steve Jobs unveiled the iPad in January 2010, its iBooks app caught my eye. The e-book revolution was underway but until that moment I had not been willing to spend hundreds of dollars on a device that only displayed books. Yet as an avid reader and longtime writer, I was sold on the iPad. It vividly pushed e-books front and center in big beautiful flashy packages that enveloped the screen. I knew right away it was a game changer and decided I must have one.

My first thought as an author of computer books was to write a book about how to create e-books for the iPad. Then I discovered—to my great delight—that iBooks, the iPad e-reader app, supports the standard EPUB format that is based on HTML and developed by a consortium of technology and publishing companies. I’m intimately familiar with HTML—the code that Web pages are written in—because of the six (soon to be seven) editions of my book “HTML, XHTML, & CSS: Visual QuickStart Guide.” More than a million copies of this book have been sold in 15 languages.

I also practice what I write. For more than 20 years, I have brainstormed, organized, designed, written, taken thousands of screenshots, and laid out, edited and delivered final files to my publisher, Peachpit Press, for all of the various editions of my books. The only part of my books that I didn’t do myself (apart from a final edit by Peachpit) was the cover.

Because I was used to creating the entire book myself, it seemed only fair that I should be able to sell an electronic edition directly from my website. Thankfully, Peachpit gener-

ously agreed. When “EPUB Straight to the Point: Creating Ebooks for the Apple iPad and Other Ereaders” was published in July 2010, I opened a bookstore on my website.

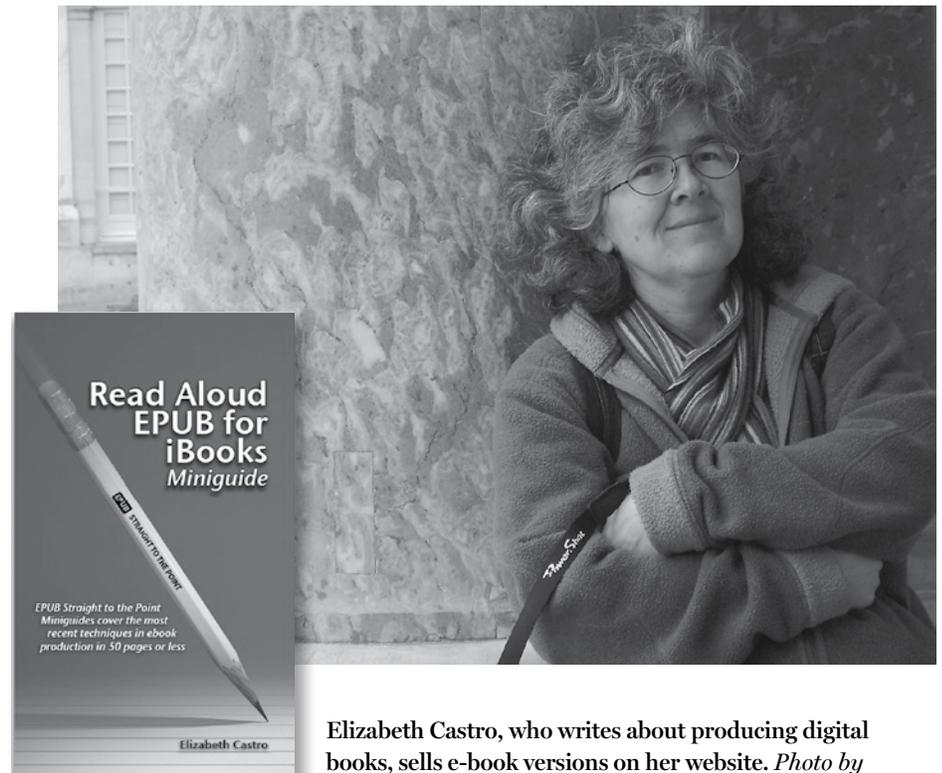
I quickly realized how much I enjoyed the digital connections I was making with my readers. When someone orders my book, I get an e-mail sharing this news. I look to see where the orders are from and it turns out that about half are from outside the United States—with almost 30 percent from Europe, about 10 percent from Australia and New Zealand, and roughly 5 percent from Canada.

On the Internet, physical distance doesn’t matter. People can get the

book they need instantly regardless of where they are. Not only that, every time I write a blog post that relates to my book, it experiences a jump in sales. Not always a big one, but it’s a reminder of the invaluable connections between my online work and my book sales. In addition, Twitter has drawn me closer to my readers and makes it easier to find out what interests them and how I can respond.

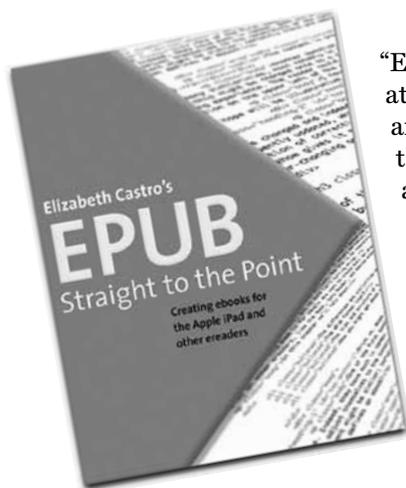
### Divide and Conquer

Last December Apple released an important new feature for the iBooks app. However, I wasn’t ready to update my entire book. So I wrote—and now



Elizabeth Castro, who writes about producing digital books, sells e-book versions on her website. *Photo by Andreu Cabré.*

## Learning the Inner Workings of an E-Book File



“EPUB Straight to the Point—Creating Ebooks for the Apple iPad and Other Ereaders” explains how to make an e-book that takes advantage of the advanced features available in the standard EPUB format. It starts with lessons using familiar computer tools—Microsoft Word and Adobe InDesign—so a writer can generate EPUB-formatted e-books using

their existing files. However, since neither program can do everything needed to create the final EPUB file, the book also takes a detailed look at the inner workings of an EPUB format file and demonstrates how to use a text editor to add basic and advanced features which are not yet supported by Word or InDesign. ■—E.C.

sell on my website—a miniguide about this more specific topic of fixed layout EPUBs. I offer it free to anyone who has bought my book, “EPUB Straight to the Point.” I also sell the miniguide for \$4 and include a \$4 coupon toward the purchase of my book. This marketing strategy keeps readers happy while it attracts new ones. I have given away more than 1,000 copies of this miniguide but in the process I’ve added 1,000 e-mail addresses to my database. Many readers who begin with the free fixed layout miniguide go on to purchase my EPUB book and the rest of the miniguides.

The big lesson for me is this: People will spend \$4 on a 30-page guide on a specific topic. One big challenge any book author faces—and perhaps journalists and authors of computer books more often than others—is keeping a book up to date, especially when only a few bits of it have changed. That’s why updating only what’s changed is appealing. By building a book in modules—rather than constructing it as a complete “bible”—I can gain flexibility, respond easily to the rapid pace of changes, and be happier than if I have to rewrite the entire book.

After realizing the advantages of this approach, I published two more

miniguides (“Audio and Video in EPUB,” and “Read Aloud EPUB for eBooks”), and I sell them on my EPUB website for \$5 each. I am very encouraged with the results, selling several of each every day. I have many more ideas for miniguides, both related to EPUB and to other topics.

Now I’ve turned back to print. I print my miniguides for my use so I wondered if others also would be interested in print editions. And print-on-demand technology makes it possible for an individual (with a background in publishing, truth be told) to create print books and market them efficiently. In the 1990’s I lived in Barcelona, Spain and had a company that published computer books in Spanish. Figuring out how many books to print was never easy. What I paid for printing was lower for each book when I printed more copies, but only if I sold them all.

Print-on-demand now enables me to upload my book and set its retail price and the discount price for wholesalers and retailers. I do this with Lightning Source, a print-on-demand company associated with Ingram Book Company, a major international distributor. Once uploaded, one of my miniguides sells for \$7.99 on Amazon and is available

at bookstores in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. When an order is placed on Amazon, Lightning Source prints my book, charges Amazon its discounted price, subtracts the cost of producing the book, and sends the rest to me. My initial investment (at least in terms of dollars) is limited to the setup fee of about \$100.

For a non-tech journalist, there are several tools that can facilitate the creation of an e-book or print-on-demand book. Apple’s Pages word processor has pretty good EPUB export, and Adobe InDesign, though costly, can be used to simultaneously coordinate the production of print and e-book versions. At present, some knowledge of the EPUB format and the underlying HTML and CSS is still necessary, and for that my books have helped thousands of people quickly get up to speed. ■

*Elizabeth Castro is the author of the “HTML, XHTML, & CSS: Visual QuickStart Guide,” “EPUB Straight to the Point,” and three miniguides about EPUB as well as books about Blogger, iPhoto, Perl and CGI, and XML.*

## Powerful People and a Book They Almost Stopped

When a Philippine investigative journalist revealed the inner workings of her nation's Supreme Court, the country's largest book publisher and leading distributor walked away.

BY MARITES DAÑGUILAN VITUG

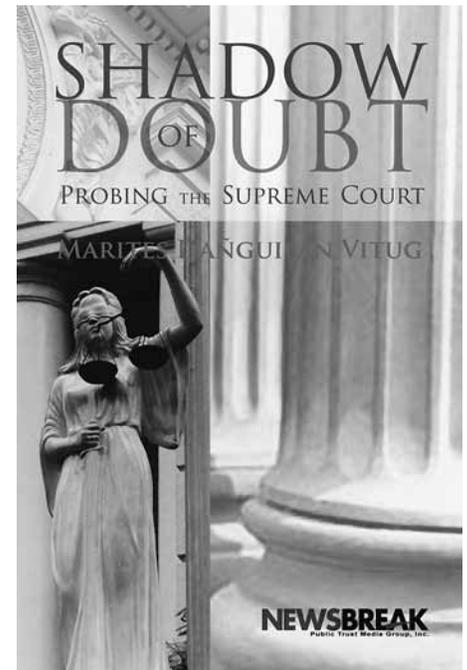
**W**hen I started to report on the Philippine Supreme Court in 2007 for Newsbreak magazine, I was intrigued—and challenged—by its culture of secrecy and its strong system of hierarchy. I couldn't know then that three years later a book I wrote to help chisel away at the court's wall of secrecy would confirm the court's formidable power and its spheres of influence when the publication and distribution of my book were halted.

The entire judiciary, composed of about 2,000 judges, thousands of court personnel, and headed by the

Supreme Court, is cloaked in this secretive culture. It is vastly different from its co-equal branches—the executive department and Congress. In these places, cabinet officials, senators and congressmen freely talk to the media. Journalists can cover most of their meetings. Public hearings are sometimes aired live on television. Reporters know most of these officials by face and by name. They are elected every three to six years.

The Supreme Court is in a league of its own with justices who are unelected. During the past administration (2001-2010) they've been appointed more

for their loyalty to the president than merit, and they serve until they reach the age of 70. Covering this court reminded me of my days reporting on the armed forces during the waning years of martial law in the early 1980's. Under the authoritarian ruler Ferdinand Marcos, it was hard for the press to penetrate the military. It was a strictly guarded and fortified camp and the lips of the men in uniform were sealed. Their culture was to follow orders, not to speak their minds. Over time, reporters developed sources within the military, and then the wall of silence cracked, especially after



Marites Dañguilan Vitug took an oath before a Manila prosecutor when she filed her rejoinder in a libel case that a Supreme Court justice had filed against her, related to the publication of her book, "Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court." *Photo by Purple Romero.*

opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. was assassinated in 1983, and a group of soldiers became greatly disenchanted with Marcos.

The book I wrote, “Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court,” opened a window on the Supreme Court’s inner workings. It was the first of its kind in the Philippines. The investigative reporting I did to write it revealed the ethical violations of justices and the book examined politicized appointments.

What happened next—the story behind my book’s circuitous journey to its eventual publication by a news organization—tells much not only about the way the court functions but also about Philippine society. Those unfamiliar with the Philippine judiciary might believe that the Supreme Court is the least powerful branch of government because it has no hold over the purse or the sword. Yet my experiences with my book confirm that the court wields a strong, yet quieter power derived from its mystique, a certain aura of mystery which comes out of its silence. There is power from being the least known branch of government, the least scrutinized, the least transparent. There is power from being at the top of an exclusive club, where the public has little access and is given only a rare glimpse.

Another lesson I learned along the way is more about journalism than about the court. Neither independent publishing nor independent journalism has yet taken firm root in Philippine society. We have a free and raucous press—until powerful vested interests are endangered or hurt. Then, only a few of those roots turn out to be very strong.

### **My Book’s Journey**

I approached Anvil Publishing, Inc., the largest publishing house in the

country. Anvil was going to publish and distribute “Shadow of Doubt,” ensuring that it would be sold through its sister company, National Book Store, the leading bookstore chain in the country. Our collaboration was on track—until I finished the manuscript. Then Anvil’s lawyers advised them not to publish the book.

They shared this news with me at a lunch meeting at a Mediterranean restaurant. At that moment, my salad topped with feta cheese lost its zing and the grilled chicken suddenly tasted flat, bereft of all its spices. This was a business decision; Anvil’s owners are

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**As we were preparing to launch ‘Shadow of Doubt’ in March 2010, I received calls and text messages that Supreme Court Justice Presbitero Velasco, Jr. had filed a 13-count libel lawsuit against me. This may be the first time in the Philippines that a sitting justice has sued a journalist for libel.**

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among the wealthiest people in the country and own businesses outside of publishing. Part of doing business in the Philippines means keeping good relations with the courts—in the event that business owners get embroiled in legal troubles.

My disappointment, however, was short-lived. Newsbreak, where I was editor in chief, agreed to publish it. This magazine remains one of the few news outlets in the Philippines that nurtures and fearlessly supports independent journalism. (I dedicated my book to the team of colleagues and friends there who stood behind this project.) Since publishing “Shadow of Doubt,” Newsbreak has published two more books about corruption—one on the Philippine military and the other on infrastructure contracts during the presidency of Gloria Arroyo. Until recently, book publishing is not something our magazine did.

Though no longer the book’s publisher, Anvil had agreed to distribute it. Yet even this promise dropped away once buzz about its content apparently worried some people at the Supreme Court. Anvil then decided it would no longer have anything to do with getting the book into the hands of readers. Losing such a big distributor was like taking away 80 percent of its potential audience. It was also like turning down the volume of my public microphone so that fewer got to hear my voice and the stories I have to tell. Of some consolation was that smaller bookstores agreed to sell the book.

As we were preparing to launch “Shadow of Doubt” in March 2010, I received calls and text messages that Supreme Court Justice Presbitero Velasco, Jr. had filed a 13-count libel lawsuit against me. This may be the first time in the Philippines that a sitting justice has sued a journalist for libel. His lawsuit had to do with a story published on the magazine’s website, [www.newsbreak.ph](http://www.newsbreak.ph).

ph, about how Velasco was getting involved in local politics in the process of helping his son, who was then running for Congress. This news had become part of the book’s epilogue.

Almost a year later Velasco again sued me; this time, my book was his target. Libel is a criminal offense in the Philippines, and my case is now pending in a Manila court. I was scheduled to be arraigned in September, but my lawyers asked for a deferment so that the Justice Department, which is not under the Supreme Court’s supervision, can review the case. While we wait, I’ve posted bail so that I don’t get arrested.

After my book was launched, threatening text messages were sent my way. Whoever was sending them clearly wanted to upset me. In essence they implied that I should have been one of those killed in the Ampatuan massacre—but who knows, I may be

next. (In 2009, 57 people, including 32 journalists, were brazenly killed in the southern province of Maguindanao.)

The Supreme Court spokesman dismissed these threats as “funny” and “ridiculous.” He insinuated that the threats were a gimmick to “generate sales for the book.” His reaction and that of others were also due to this being the first time that a book pierced the cocoon of the Supreme Court. When people, such as these justices, aren’t accustomed to being held accountable, they expect that when they do things that might not look good, such acts won’t be made public. In turn, nothing will happen to them.

When the book was finally launched, I remember saying that “if there is any sadness I feel, it’s a tiny core of profound sadness that, in our society,

we seem not to understand the meaning of independence, the value of research, and the role of journalists.” Only the presence of Newsbreak—and its independence—enabled my book to be published. For others who lack access to such an alternative, the expanding presence of digital self-publishing platforms offers possibilities that didn’t exist only a few years ago.

On the positive side, I was surprised when my book became a bestseller, by Philippine standards. The Kindle version was, at one time, among Amazon’s top 10 bestselling books about the courts. Readers told me that my words touched a soft spot in their hearts, reaching the place that a story honestly told can. Clearly there is a longing for honesty and a desire for change in a judiciary perceived to

have lost its moral rudder.

A son of a judge in a province wrote to me, saying that his father, after 28 years of serving in the judiciary, still lives in a rented house and drives a jeep to work. His only luxury in life, the son wrote, is the printed word. The dutiful son said he was going to give the book to his father.

His letter has helped me get over the initially bruising experience. I’m now starting to work on a sequel. ■

*Marites Dañguilan Vitug, a 1987 Nieman Fellow, is the author of “Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court” and chairwoman of the advisory board of Newsbreak, the independent magazine where she was editor in chief for almost 10 years.*

## Books Take Over Where Daily Journalism Can’t Go

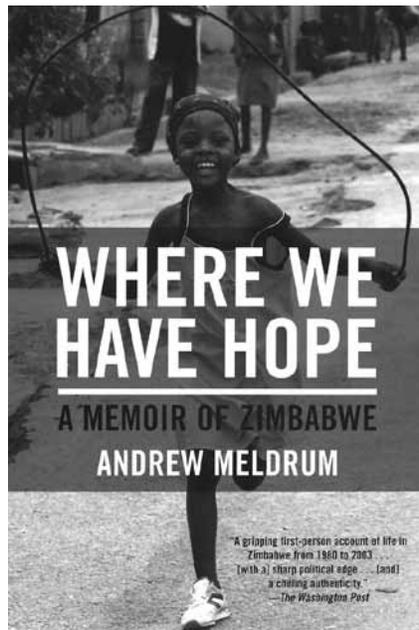
‘It is difficult to do justice to the complexities of Zimbabwe’s story while still grabbing and sustaining readers’ interest when so much of what reporters hear is depressing.’

BY ANDREW MELDRUM

All that has happened in Zimbabwe—including President Robert Mugabe’s brutal oppression and the spirited challenge to his iron-fisted rule—provides compelling stories of suffering and success, torture and kindness, cowardice and bravery.

For years Mugabe has waged a relentless campaign to silence the press yet many journalists still manage to report the news. But the epic nature of Zimbabwe’s struggle for democracy has compelled many journalists to write at greater length in books.

Reporting can be tough, if not impossible, in Zimbabwe. To convey events with accuracy, fairness and enough background and analysis so that readers understand the country’s situation is as essential in writing non-



fiction books as it is in daily journalism. But writing a book about Zimbabwe becomes a perplexing task: It is difficult to do justice to the complexities of Zimbabwe’s story while still grabbing and sustaining readers’ interest when so much of what reporters hear is depressing.

Authors who take on this task face another obstacle constructed by Mugabe. He has always depicted the country in stark terms of race—black vs. white. He asserts that Western, white journalists cannot tell Zimbabwe’s story. They will, he contends, distort it to support the white minority who once ruled the country when it was Rhodesia. This is, of course, nonsense, but it is something that lingers nonetheless in the minds of

many authors—as it did in mine—when writing about Zimbabwe.

When I wrote my book, “Where We Have Hope: A Memoir of Zimbabwe,” I solved these conundrums by telling stories of the lives and circumstances of Zimbabweans. Although a memoir, my book was actually more about the Zimbabweans I came to know in my 23 years of reporting from their country. My time there stretched from it achieving independence in 1980 to 2003 when the government expelled me. So in my book, I was able to describe both the time when the country offered a beacon of hope as it moved from racial war to racial reconciliation and then the period when it descended into the steely grip of Mugabe and his ruling party, ZANU-PF.

Relying on my journalistic style of storytelling, I focused on those I’d encountered. Though their stories often told of terrible violence and repression, I worked to include compelling moments of the inspiring bravery, determination and humor that are so much a part of the Zimbabwean story—and leave the reader feeling some sense of hope about the future.

### ‘The Fear’

In his recent book, “The Fear: Robert

Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe,” Peter Godwin tackles similar challenges to mine—and the result is gripping and, at times, enthralling. Godwin, a white Zimbabwean, is an accomplished writer and with a valid vision of his country. His first memoir, “Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa,” is a rattling great read about growing up in Rhodesia and coming of age in Zimbabwe. In his second, “When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa,” Godwin told more of his family’s history in Zimbabwe, especially about how his father, a Jew who escaped from Poland, succeeded in passing himself off as British and raising his family in southern Africa, only to see it all turn to ashes as Zimbabwe crumbled.

“The Fear” is less about Godwin and more about Zimbabwe. As he travels through the country with his irrepressible sister, Georgina, it is stories of Zimbabweans, black and white, that form the backbone of this book. Godwin, who now lives in New York City, returned to Zimbabwe in 2008 at a time when it appeared that Mugabe had lost the presidential election and was about to be forced from office. But the sly, master politician, now in his 80’s, still outmaneuvered everyone—domestically and internationally—to stay in power.

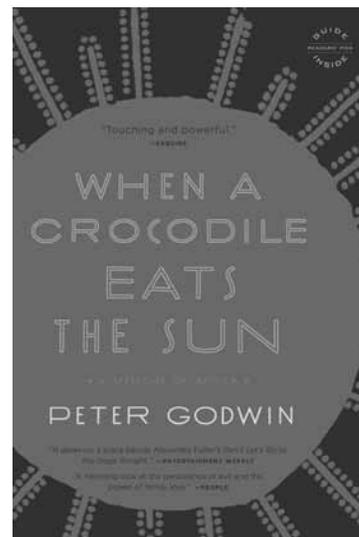
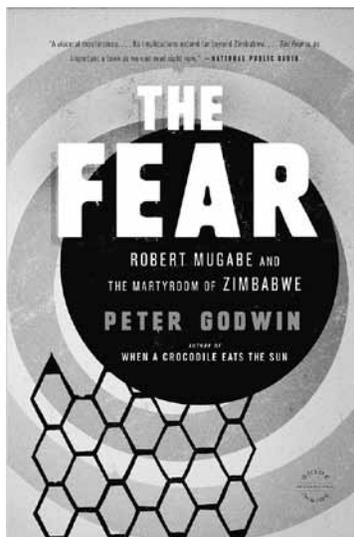
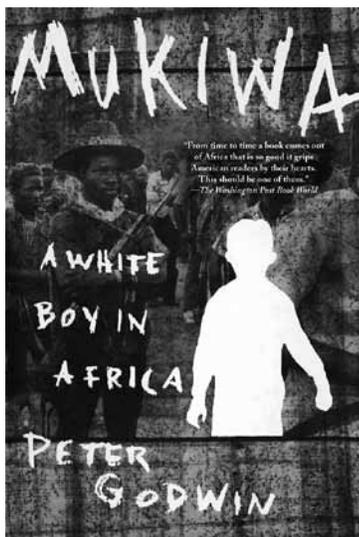
To respond to the 2008 electoral

challenge, Mugabe returned to his tried and true strategy of unleashing fearsome waves of torture and violence across the country in which hundreds died and thousands of citizens have been horrifically abused.

In “The Fear,” Godwin tells with clarity the story of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai’s boycott of his scheduled runoff election against Mugabe. Godwin shows us why Tsvangirai had the understandable fear that many of his supporters would be killed in the elections.

Godwin enables us to meet Denias Dombo, a rural organizing secretary for Tsvangirai’s MDC party, who describes how Mugabe’s militia surrounded his family’s hut. To save his wife and children he ran outside and was beaten unconscious. The violent gang left for a brief spell, giving a neighbor enough time to drag Dombo into the nearby woods and cover him with branches. When the thugs returned, they couldn’t find him, and later he was taken to a hospital in Harare, where his broken arms and legs were put in casts. At the time Godwin speaks with him, Dombo is tormented by not knowing how his wife and children are surviving without him.

“The Fear” ends with a chilling story about Chenjerai Mungezo, an MDC member in rural Bindura who



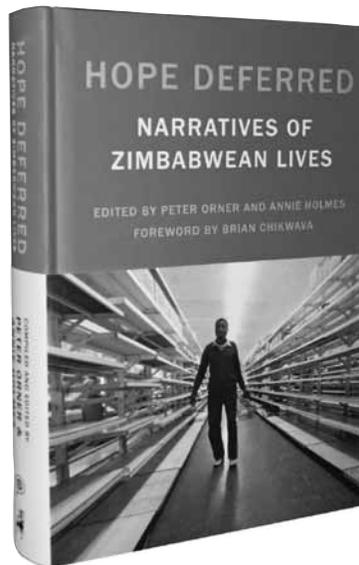
stood in elections for a post in the Bindura Rural District Council, which is a hardline ZANU-PF stronghold. Mangezo won, and Mugabe's ZANU-PF officials were so enraged they went to his hut where they chanted that they would kill him. To save his family he left his hut to meet the gang. He was beaten with rocks and logs and iron bars. He shouted to his assailants "You had better be sure to kill me, because if you don't, I am going to come after you, all of you. I know who you are."

Miraculously, Mangezo survives. As he did with Dombo, Godwin takes us to Mangezo's hospital room in Harare, where he was similarly immobilized with casts on his arms and legs. When Mangezo heard that the swearing-in ceremony for Bindura's rural councilors was being held, he defied doctors' orders to be there. He did not fit in a car because of his casts so he rode in the open back of a pickup truck. His appearance confounded Mugabe's councilors who had assumed he was either dead or too terrified to return. He had festooned his plaster casts with MDC slogans and, as Godwin writes, took "great delight in telling the local journalists there for the opening how ZANU had attempted to eliminate him."

M a n g e z o recovered and returned to his rural home, where he lives among the people who tried to kill him. He quickly began helping others who had been beaten, finding medical treatment for them. In Godwin's capable hands, Mangezo's buoyant, gleefully defiant personality shines through. It is his personal story and other harrowing ones that become the strong spine of "The Fear."

### 'Hope Deferred'

Author Annie Holmes, raised in Zimbabwe, deftly enables her fellow citizens' voices to be heard in a collection of



24 oral histories that she and Peter Orner compiled in "Hope Deferred: Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives." Their book is part of the "Voice of Witness" series published by McSweeney's Books. These narrated histories are bleak and full of suffering, yet those who tell them are brimming with life and tenacity and courage.

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**The challenge in writing about Zimbabwe is first to be able to talk with people freely—with them feeling safe about the encounter—and then to do the kind of reporting that digs into the complexities of people's lives.**

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Here is an excerpt from an oral history of a Zimbabwean woman who works as a house servant in Cape Town, 1,000 miles from her family in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe:

I wish things could really change and I could go home. That would be best for me. Here it's okay, but there are times when you need your family around, like when you get sick and there's no one to look after you, when you miss your family, and when you need somebody close to talk

to. Yes, there are church elders, but at times you need somebody very close.

When I call, my son asks me, "Mom can you please buy me clothes?" Some of his friends, their mothers are also here in South Africa, so he also likes asking for the same things they get from their parents: "Can you please buy me such and such a thing?" Every time, I make sure I buy it for him, so that he doesn't feel that he is a lonely child without a mother.

A few years ago, I heard a joke making the rounds in Zimbabwe. "How do you define an optimist?" the joke goes. The answer: "A Zimbabwean who thinks the country has hit rock bottom." Its grim humor pokes fun at the situation where even as their country tumbles from crisis to crisis, the people remain full of hope.

The challenge in writing about Zimbabwe is first to be able to talk with people freely—with them feeling safe about the encounter—and then to do

the kind of reporting that digs into the complexities of people's lives. Their depth of suffering will be apparent. The challenge is to convey the spirit and sense of courage, the humor, and the acts of heroism that the

Zimbabwean people engage in every day, against all odds, as they continue to fight for democracy in their government and prosperity in their economy. ■

*Andrew Meldrum, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, is senior editor at GlobalPost. From 1980 to 2007 he worked in Zimbabwe and South Africa, writing for The Guardian, The Economist, and several other publications.*

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 AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS
 

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## Transit: An Assignment and an Idea— Now a Book, Exhibit and Website

BY ESPEN RASMUSSEN

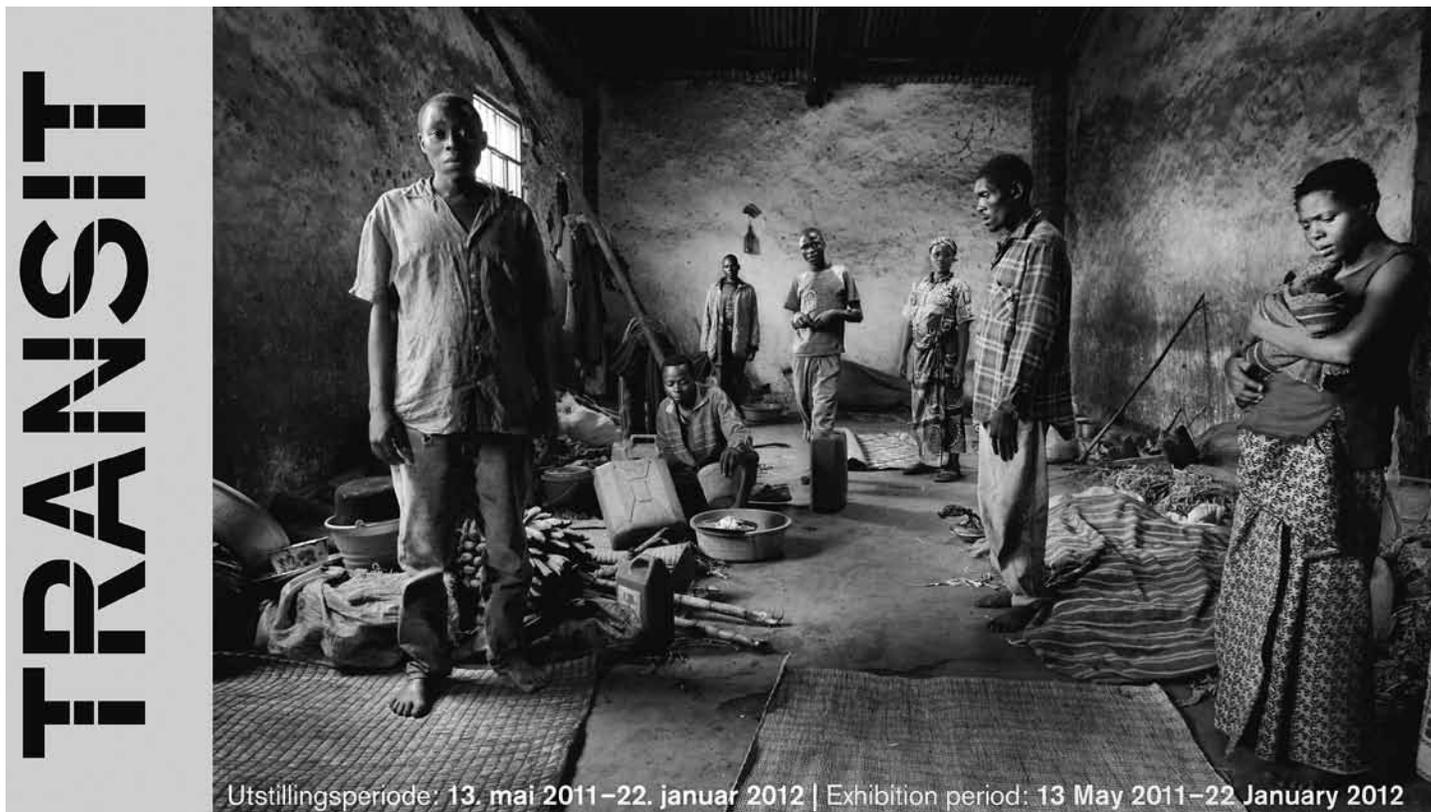
**S**even years in the making, my book “Transit” is now on the table in front of me. Its pages tell stories about people on the run, of those who are displaced in their own country and those who are forced to leave it. My photographs show how

they manage to survive and portray the myriad challenges they confront. Their faces—sometimes their bodies alone—convey fears they endure, joyful moments they embrace, and hopes they hold inside.

“Transit” did not begin as a book.

It started in 2004 when I made my first trip to Chad, on the border with the warring Darfur region of Sudan. Working as a freelance photojournalist, I sent reports about refugees to the Norwegian newspaper VG.

My own interest in people’s expe-



A poster for his exhibition shows displaced people who sought refuge in a church in Rubare, Democratic Republic of the Congo. They fled their village of Ntamugenga after rebels attacked and burned their houses.



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A boy practices gymnastics on the floor of a hut in a slum outside Quibdo in western Colombia. More than 11,000 internally displaced people live in this area.

riences with displacement, already keen when I arrived in Chad, only strengthened during my time there. I saw few stories about the journeys that refugees like these make to resettle in unfamiliar places. I wanted to show what it is like to flee one's home and arrive somewhere else, often in times of conflict and despair, and then live in a foreign place and feel forgotten.

Since my first trip to Chad, I have been closely associated with VG, first as a freelance photographer and

correspondent in Paris, then as a picture editor on staff in Norway. I took some trips for VG and produced major feature articles about people on the run. While on these assignments, I always asked to stay longer in the field—relying on my holiday and personal leave—so I could go more deeply into the story. Still, the vast majority of the trips I took for “Transit” lasted two or three weeks and were taken on my own initiative when I was on an unpaid leave.

## A Visual Book

After four trips I knew I wanted to create a book. So when I applied to the Freedom of Expression Foundation in Oslo for support, I let them know that I would convey these journeys not only in a book, but in an exhibition and a website since I believe all of these vehicles are necessary to make a book successful. I received \$60,000 from the foundation; this meant I could intensify my efforts. To finance my

*Photo and text by Espen Rasmussen.*




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A Janjaweed militia soldier in Darfur, Sudan where the rebel group has terrorized the local population since 2003.

trips, I sold parts of these stories to my newspaper. With my background as a reporter and a photographer, I usually travel by myself; this is beneficial in keeping costs low and enabling me to get as close as possible to the people I photograph.

Once I had this grant, I began to focus on the elements I'd need for the people's journeys to be visualized coherently on the pages of a book. I considered using repetitive images or doing a series of images, and I thought

about how portraits and short feature stories might work. Along the way I abandoned some of these ideas, such as featuring close-up portraits of refugees.

Making such decisions is critical in being sure that the book becomes something greater than a collection of individual reports. I had to figure out how to tie images together and weave words with photographs, all in ways that worked well with the book's overall design.

I encountered challenges along the

way, many of them because of working simultaneously as a staff picture editor at a newspaper while producing my own project as a photojournalist. Carving out the time to work on "Transit" has been problematic. I tried to plan my trips well in advance so I could let VG know my travel schedule and there was time to find a temporary replacement for me. At times I've traveled on short notice, such as when I covered the war in Georgia. Then there were times I was not able to travel to areas

*Photo and text by Espen Rasmussen.*

I wanted to visit because I could not leave my job at the paper.

These days a photography book is usually paired with an exhibition. When I shot for VG, I'd look for solid stories that stood well on their own. In thinking about "Transit," my perspective would broaden and I'd look for different ways to tell these stories. This additional work demanded a lot of time as I'd search for more personal stories as well as ones about communities that widened and deepened my portrayal of refugees and their circumstances, past, present and future.

The ability to concentrate for several weeks on the same story was crucial for the production of the book and exhibition. But with my job at the newspaper and my family—my wife and two young children—I had to limit the time for each reporting trip to a maximum of three weeks. This has forced me to work intensively. I figured out how to dig deeply into stories in a relatively short period. What makes this work is the preparation I do in advance of my departure.

In 2008 I took a year's leave from my newspaper job to devote time to my "Transit" project. During this period, I worked as a freelance photographer for newspapers and magazines, but I had the opportunity to focus on "Transit" for extended periods, whether it was in my home office or in the field. I traveled more than I normally did

when I was at VG.

A year later my plans for a book and an exhibition turned more serious when I presented part of the project at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo. The center decided to host a large exhibition—and offered the financial resources to make it happen—so this

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**I encountered challenges along the way, many of them because of working simultaneously as a staff picture editor at a newspaper while producing my own project as a photojournalist. Carving out the time to work on 'Transit' has been problematic.**

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meant that publishing my book became more realistic, especially since I still had some money saved from the Freedom of Expression Foundation. By 2010, I put together dummies of the book to demonstrate what I wanted it to look like, and Dewi Lewis Publishing agreed to release it.

Still, editing the book and the exhibition required an enormous amount of time. During the past four years I made a number of book dummies using material I had collected. Doing this gave me ways to see what was missing and the opportunity to test out different narrative devices, which was useful in determining the shape of stories. As my deadline approached, I had to use whatever time I could find outside of my day job at VG to look through thousands of photographs, make selections, edit and write captions.

I had also used a video camera in the field so I edited that work down to four films that became part of the exhibition and now appear on the interactive website ([www.transit-project.com](http://www.transit-project.com)) that a design agency developed at a low cost. Having a website is important since I want as many people as possible to

see the project and absorb its stories. I decided to post more pictures (181) on the website than are in the book or exhibition. I also created a Facebook page for the "Transit" project that I use to post updates about it.

For the most part, my newspaper gave me the room I needed to work on this project. There were times when I had to fight for the room, but those times were counterbalanced by the ways that the "Transit" project became a natural part of my work for the newspaper. Producing this book while simultaneously creating an exhibition, designing a website, and launching a Facebook page—all of which are essential to having a photography book be noticed—required an excessive amount of work.

What made this book a reality were unpaid holidays and personal leaves, benevolent bosses, and, of course, unwavering dedication. ■

*Espen Rasmussen is a picture editor at VG, Norway's largest newspaper.*



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What had been one of Baghdad's most popular restaurants was reopened in Damascus, Syria. The owner and all of the staff are Iraqi refugees.

*Photo and text by Espen Rasmussen.*



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In a Roma camp in Serbia, homes are made from plastic, tarpaulins and containers. When it rains, the houses and streets fill with water.

*Photo and text by Espen Rasmussen.*



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In Yemen, 3-year-old twins Hassan and Hossin and their 2-year-old sister Hannan are tied up for six hours a day while their mother is at work. “I have to tie them up,” says Selma Ahmed Adem, their mother. “There is nobody here to look after them and I am afraid they will crawl out of the window while I’m away.”

*Photo and text by Espen Rasmussen.*

# A Photography Book—Absorbed in Print and On the iPad

‘In “Capitolio,” a book and an iPad app, Magnum photographer Christopher Anderson connects circumstances of Caracas’s common folk with the failure of the country’s urban modernization.’

BY BORIS MUÑOZ

**D**uring the last decade Venezuela’s “Bolivarian Revolution,” led by President Hugo Chávez, has generated a plethora of photographic images. It is not possible to think of my country without conjuring up images of mass protests and marches or, conversely, emblematic ones of its strongman, the still uncontested protagonist Chávez. Then there is also the violence and chaos inhabiting sections of Caracas, Venezuela’s capital.

In “Capitolio,” a book and an iPad app, Magnum photographer Christopher Anderson, connects the circumstances of Caracas’s common folk with the failure of the country’s urban modernization. It is in an almost religious sense that he portrays Caracas as a battlefield between the forces of good and evil. Images he uses to tell these stories exist in the difficult crossroads between photojournalism and art photography, between critique and propaganda: all of this is located somewhere in the middle between a critical vision and mystification.

To open the hardcover book is to confront a wall of images of poor Caracas neighborhoods, the *barrios*. The convoluted architecture of these disheveled dwellings speaks to the miserable existence of so many people living on the margins. Anderson contrasts such scenes of poverty with the skyscrapers of Caracas’s Parque Central, which once were the tallest buildings in Latin America. He also compares them with the congested



and badly maintained highways and with the Capitolio, the domed building that houses the national government, a radiant symbol of Venezuela’s dysfunctional political system. All are emblematic of the betrayal of the promise of an abundant future fueled by petro-dollars.

Anderson portrays the collapse of modernity by showing the jungle atmosphere and barbarism that has emerged in its place. As a visual metaphor, his photographs depict misery and human depravity now found in the cracks of building facades and beneath the concrete park benches. As if to emphasize his point with irony, Anderson cites a stanza of the Venezuelan national anthem: “If tyranny raises its voice, follow the example of Caracas.” Caracas epitomizes to him the place where the manifest destiny of freedom and revolution meet failed modernity and corruption.

## Details as Context

Caracas is often shrouded in heavy rain clouds. Behind, and sometimes above, the clouds, the city’s poor neighborhoods perch on hills. Here, Anderson portrays the residents who live in shadows and struggle with violence. In his panoramas, the light is not transparent; it has a grainy quality—a metaphor for Caracas’s reality, since it is not easy to determine the city’s exact shape because of the murky light. His black and white images have a porous quality like pages of an old newspaper, and this gives the

photographs a certain pulp, and a sensationalist tone.

In Anderson’s images, details provide context, as parts explain the whole. At least this happens when viewed by a Venezuelan who is quite familiar with Caracas. To reflect the high level of violence, for example, he displays a wall with dozens of handprints, but does so without explanation. Following that a man with a pistol is seen standing guard on a street corner. Next is a two-page image of a face with eyes shining through a profound darkness, reflecting the light from a television screen. At the same time, these same eyes appear to be watching us from behind the screen.

Three young men, probably delinquents, appear on the next pages. Do the handprints belong to them? Then, we peer into a holding cell in a police station. On the wall hang chains and handcuffs that presumably restrained

the youths' hands. Later, we see a stain on the sidewalk, then feet of indifferent onlookers. We suppose the stain is fresh blood.

Urban imprints of violence are everywhere, but the rhythm of these images leaves the viewer with ambiguous impulses. First, one has a sense of being repulsed, then a feeling of being fascinated with the portrayals of danger and brutality. Until almost halfway through the book, all a reader finds is a cinematic succession of such storytelling. To those without personal acquaintance with these places and people, the absence of explicit context could be problematic. It could lead to a false conclusion that all of Venezuela is an enormous violent *barrio* with chaotic streets and walls defaced by graffiti.

Soon, Anderson's portraits appear and usher in a sense of intimacy. His photograph of a boy standing on a wall symbolically separating the *barrio* from the city is among the best in "Capitolio." Splendid, too, is one of a couple whose bodies interlock in an intense dance with overtones of street fighting and erotic choreography. Later, we arrive at images of Venezuela's important mining centers. These serve as an allegory for a society accustomed to living off the riches of its underground resources. With a dramatic use of light and contrast, Anderson pays tribute to Sebastião Salgado, who is the master epic photographer of migration and laborers.

Anderson challenges us to think about what binds these supersized images to his central message. In this case, they depict a nation with abundant natural resources that has lost its way and identity in the face of modernization as Venezuelans experience revolutionary delirium in a time of consumerism and global capitalism. Anderson weaves this theme through "Capitolio," though he is not entirely successful, in part because of the absence of a sequential narrative needed to guide readers to such a conclusion.

Anderson appears transformed by what he has seen. At first he seems bewildered by the stark contrasts



Hugo Chávez and his entourage, 2006. Photo by Christopher Anderson/Magnum Photos.

of opulence and poverty. Later, he assumes an ironic distance in the face of the dysfunctional political process he has observed. His final images provide commentary about the morality of the "new man"—the revolutionary. In what seems the oddest section of his book, Anderson quotes José Martí, the hero-martyr of the Cuban revolution:

Men are like stars  
Some generate  
Their own light  
While others reflect  
The brilliance  
They receive.

He then shows Chávez in a Caribbean version of German director Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film "Triumph of the Will," speaking as commander and president from the "people's balcony."

The final photograph in the book shows a grotesque close-up of a face that looks like Chávez. This face conveys a sense of satanic majesty with its exaggerated features, and it looks over the world from a close yet paradoxically inaccessible vantage point. But the image is neither a portrait nor is it journalistic. Filled with pathos and black magic, this photograph creates an almost surreal archetype as the embodiment of evil.

## Digital Enhancement

Today's digital enhancement of books enables us to discover different dimensions of this project—and find answers to what might have puzzled us in the print edition. Does the face belong to Chávez? Because a companion app for "Capitolio" was created for the iPad, we can find out in an interview with Anderson that while the picture is not of Chávez, it is, in his words, "someone who could be Chávez, or could be many Latin American leaders." The idea he is conveying is that dictators and supreme leaders govern from the "other world." And though he doesn't say so, Anderson seems to suggest that this is the vital essence of their power.

While satisfactory, the iPad experience of "Capitolio" lacked for me the same striking visual impact that the photographs had in the oversized hardcover book. Yet, the digital "reading" experience provided invaluable information about Anderson's vision that I didn't get from the printed book. On the iPad, for example, Anderson displayed his favorite photos in a "Director's Cut," and while this collection is less ambitious, it's also more concentrated and clear.

Then there is the interview with Anderson, done by photojournalist Tim Hetherington, who was killed while

working in Libya in April. “I’m not sure I can call this book journalism,” Anderson tells him. “I do comment on the nature of journalism. I didn’t set out to tell the story of Venezuela or to report something about Venezuela. This book is about an experience of Venezuela, and there are truths in that experience, but they are my truths.” This seems strange for Anderson to say since many of the images on the pages of “Capitolio” are part of the body of journalistic work he did between 2004 and 2008 that was published in magazines such as Newsweek. Anderson also explains that he wanted to present a cinematic experience as a continuum of his photographs. He was not looking for an iconic image, he tells us, but one wonders about this when staring at the book’s haunting final image.

Exploring his book and its iPad app leads to a fuller and clearer sense of Anderson’s intentions with this project. His images embed the message he wanted to deliver about the wasteful direction of Venezuela’s political course. He shows us a nation shrouded in the limbo of violence and the backward progress of decay with Chávez seen as almost a natural outcome and the people’s divine pun-



The “Capitolio” iPad app includes an interview with photographer Christopher Anderson as well as photos not included in the book. *Photo by Jonathan Seitz.*

ishment. In leaving the impression of deep polarization and the vision of evil triumphing over good, Anderson does not do justice to a society as complex as Venezuela’s. ■

*Boris Muñoz, a 2010 Nieman Fellow, was editor in chief of Nueva Sociedad, editor of Exceso, and*

*taught literature and culture at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. He is a freelance journalist in the United States. June Carolyn Erlick, editor in chief of ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America, translated this article.*



Caracas, 2004. *Photo by Christopher Anderson/Magnum Photos.*

## Trying to Make a Difference

A series that points the way to preventing deaths when police respond to 911 calls involving the mentally ill elicits praise, but not change or even a public conversation.

BY ANNMARIE TIMMINS

In the first six months of this year, New Hampshire police officers shot four mentally ill people as they suffered suicidal breakdowns. Three died and the fourth lost his left leg. It was a tally without precedent in the state, and save for the victims'

families, no one was sounding an alarm.

Not the mental health providers. Not the police. Not even the media.

It was enough, apparently, that the state had justified each shooting, concluding that the officers

had fired only to save their own lives. I couldn't disagree after reading the state's investigative reports. The officers would have been stabbed or shot had they not fired.

But I believed these shootings raised much bigger questions



Family and friends gather to mourn a man who was fatally shot by police. His killing was part of a Concord (N.H.) Monitor investigation into police shootings of mentally ill people. *Photo by Alexander Cohn/Concord Monitor.*

that weren't being asked. Could these fatal encounters have been avoided? Would better access to mental health counseling have made a difference? Why had the police become the first responders to the mentally ill? And did they have training for these calls?

My editors and I decided to start that conversation. Over two months this summer, my colleague Maddie Hanna and I interviewed police officers, community mental health providers, state officials, and victims' families in an effort to answer those questions. Two months of reporting time is a generous gift at the Concord (N.H.) Monitor, a daily community newspaper with only nine reporters. That's how important the paper viewed its responsibility to break this near silence.

Our interviews gave us more insight than we could have hoped for. Police officers shared their fear of responding to suicidal 911 calls, especially when the caller is armed as these victims were. We learned that only two police departments in the state provided officers in-depth training on handling calls involving the mentally ill. Those departments believed the training had dramatically reduced the number of injuries to both the mentally ill in crisis and the responding officers.

Meanwhile, none of the departments involved in the shootings had pursued this extra training, mainly because they couldn't afford to pay officers overtime to attend. And our state's attorney general, the highest law enforcement officer in New Hampshire, had no intention of requiring or even suggesting that all police departments expand officer training.

We were able to show how state budget cuts and insurance limits had reduced the availability of mental health services. One victim had been hospitalized twice for psychiatric illnesses but was released before she was well because her insurance capped her hospital stays to 11 days. Another victim had stopped taking one of his schizophrenia medications after he lost his job and couldn't afford the pills.

It became easier to see why the police were increasingly being called to respond to mental health emergen-

cies: They will always respond to a distraught caller, no matter the time or the person's ability to pay.

Our four-part series, "Desperate Acts, Violent Endings," ran in September. The feedback from our subjects was encouraging. They felt we had avoided assigning blame and had made a complex problem easier to understand.

I thought my biggest disappointment was going to be the story we couldn't land. Hanna had done extensive interviews with a police officer and the relatives of a suicidal man he'd shot a few years ago. With help from a priest, the officer and the relatives had reconciled with each other. That story was going to end our series until the officer's wife decided their kids were too young to learn that their father had killed a man.

Unfortunately, there were bigger disappointments. Despite our reporting and the fact that our stories had been widely read in print and online, the series has not made the difference we hoped. It didn't generate the conversation our state needs to have.

Local mental health providers praised the series for asking hard questions but have not publicly asked those questions themselves. A retired police chief who teaches police tactics told us the stories prompted him to offer more mental health expertise to his pupils. But no one in the law enforcement community has called for a review of police training.

The two departments that offer in-depth training on responding to mental health calls offered to share their training with other departments in ways they might find affordable. They haven't had any takers.

The fear of lawsuits filed by the families of victims is undoubtedly one reason law enforcement officials have remained silent. One of this year's shooting victims is planning to sue his shooters. Families of the other victims still have three years to decide whether to do the same.

There is no easy answer here. Where did these final encounters really begin? It wasn't with the 911 calls that brought the police to the victims' homes. It was

more likely months earlier when the victims stopped taking their medications, decided not to seek professional help, or found themselves unable to afford mental health care. Add shrinking budgets for mental health services and an unpromising economy, and the situation grows more complicated.

Hanna and I talked about the series on two popular shows at the local radio station. We got a few calls and kudos for a job well done but not what we hoped for: Someone with authority to make this a public conversation.

When the host asked me what I thought the series had accomplished, I was honest. I told her I've seen stories about abused animals generate more attention and reaction.

## Getting Results

I have experienced this frustration once before, when I covered the clergy abuse scandal in New Hampshire. Our then attorney general had forced our Catholic diocese to make public nearly 10,000 pages of internal church records that showed how fiercely the church had protected its abusive priests instead of the children being raped.

I was certain the church's own records—as opposed to just allegations from victims—would persuade New Hampshire Catholics to demand more accountability and transparency from their priests and bishop. What more could they need than their church's own meticulous records of illegal and destructive behavior?

The revolution I hoped for didn't happen. The Catholics already agitating for safer churches agitated more fiercely. But there were too many people who called my reporting a witch-hunt and an unfair attack on the church. Their leaders had sinned, they said, and deserved forgiveness, not such intense scrutiny.

For a long time afterward, I questioned my role as a community reporter. It's supposed to work like this: The upside of not having a worldwide audience is the opportunity to see up close how your work can make a difference. You give readers what they need to know and then report how they use

that information to demand change or create better public policy or get attention from their elected leaders.

In these moments, I remind myself of all those stories that did resonate and persuade people to make change.

Gay couples could not jointly adopt children in all 10 counties within New Hampshire until I reported how differently probate court judges were reading the adoption law.

After I wrote stories about a popu-

lar park that had become a place for public, anonymous sex, the city took action and the park is now a safe, comfortable place.

I think about the domestic and sexual assault victims who've let me tell their stories in hopes of educating the public. One of those stories prompted the creation of a state policy on handling such calls.

I've still got a winning record, I realize. And maybe this conversation

about deadly encounters between the mentally ill and the police will still happen. ■

*Annmarie Timmins, a 2011 Nieman Fellow, has been a reporter with the Concord (N.H.) Monitor in Concord for 19 years. She has won state and regional reporting awards, including the first Donald M. Murray Outstanding Journalism Award from the New Hampshire Writers Project.*

## 1966

**Robert A. Caro** has been named the 2011 Janet Weis Fellow in Contemporary Letters at Bucknell University.

The Weis fellowship is an annual award recognizing "an individual who represents the very highest level of achievement in the craft of writing within the realms of fiction, nonfiction, or biography," according to the school's website. Previous winners include John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Toni Morrison. Caro will deliver a lecture at Bucknell in February.

"Robert Caro is a standard-setter for other political historians," Bucknell president John Bravman said. "As the presidential election year begins, we will look forward to hearing from a writer with Mr. Caro's extraordinary life of insights into the presidency, government and American decision-making."

Caro is a historian and biographer best known for his works on New York's master builder Robert Moses and President Lyndon B. Johnson. "The Passage of Power," the fourth volume in Caro's series about Johnson, will be published by Knopf in May. Over the past three decades, Caro's Johnson books have received two National Book Critics Circle awards, a National Book Award, and a Pulitzer Prize.

## 1968

**Jerome Aumante**, professor emeritus at Rutgers University, evaluated

health journalism and health communication curricula and training needs in Mozambique. The evaluation was done for the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Communication Programs, which has a major grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to combat communicable diseases with a focus on HIV/AIDS. He was part of a team from Empowering Communications, which is assisting with journalism and media initiatives in Mozambique.

He met with administrators, faculty and students at Polytechnic University in the capital city of Maputo, which is the site of a new health journalism and health communication initiative. The university is establishing a new health communication center and radio station and will create curricula at the undergraduate level and in a new master's degree program that is being designed with support from the USAID grant to Johns Hopkins.

"Mozambique is a vibrant, developing nation emerging from its Portuguese colonial history and facing serious health challenges when one of six of its people have contracted HIV/AIDS and the government has launched a nationwide campaign to fight it," Aumante said. "A new generation of trained health journalists and health communicators is urgently needed and my recommendations deal with new programs the university can launch and practical continuing education programs for journalists already in the field."

**H. Brandt Ayers** received the Carr Van Anda Award from Ohio University's E.W. Scripps School of Journalism in late September.

Ayers has served as the editor and publisher of The Anniston Star in his native Alabama since 1969. During that time, the newspaper has become well known for its courageous reporting and editorial independence, and Time magazine twice named it the "best small newspaper in the United States."

"Brandt Ayers is a bit of a living legend in the American newspaper industry, and is perhaps the best-known publisher/editor of what we often refer to as 'community newspapers,'" said professor Bill Reader, who nominated Ayers. "The Anniston Star has been a paper to watch for me for my entire career, both as a full-time working journalist and later as a journalist-scholar and journalism professor."

At the awards ceremony, Ayers delivered a speech, entitled "The News Stops Here," about the value of community newspapers in the modern news environment.

"The Wall Street Journal isn't going to cover your mayor's race and The New York Times will not follow the rising football fortunes of two rival high schools," he said. "Only our printed papers or websites will do that."

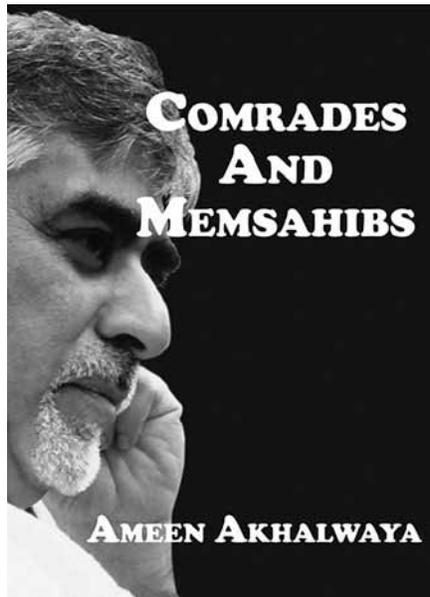
"Regardless of whether the paper is delivered on paper or by pixels, human nature is a constant," he concluded. "It is a centripetal force, constantly drawing us to a center. Call it the town square or the back porch. Y'all come!"

## A Posthumous Tribute to a Journalist's Career

The family of the late **Ameen Akhalwaya**, NF '82, has published "Comrades and Mem-Sahibs," a collection of his writings.

Before he died of cancer in 1998, Akhalwaya had been working on a memoir. His wife Farida and son Zaytoon—along with friends **Joseph Thloloe**, NF '89, and **Quraysh Patel**—have brought his vision into print.

From his earliest writing with the *Rand Daily Mail*, where he worked in the '70's, to his groundbreaking work as the founder of the alternative newspaper *The Indicator* in 1985, Akhalwaya was a leading voice for press freedom in South Africa. He continued to be



a prominent figure in the country after the end of apartheid, joining the South African Broadcasting Corporation as executive editor of current affairs in 1993 and working as media director in 1996 for Cape Town's 2004 Olympic bid.

"Ameen's columns, news reports, and general analysis provide us with a fascinating perspective on our society from the 1970's to the recent '90's," wrote Thloloe, South Africa's press ombudsman, in the book's foreword. "His lens is constantly adjusted from the intensely personal to the wider view of the world. This collection provides us with insights into Ameen's world and into Ameen." ■

1969

**Marvin "Larry" Allison**, a reporter and editor who spent more than 50 years at the *Press-Telegram* of Long Beach, California, died on October 30th of complications from pneumonia. He was 77.

In 1957 Allison joined the *Independent Press-Telegram*, as the paper was then known, as a reporter. He went on to hold nearly every position at the paper and became editor in 1978 after two years working for Knight Ridder at the *Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader* and the *Detroit Free Press*. He became editorial page editor in 1990 and held that position until his death.

"He was a consummate newspaperman who loved coming to work every day," said Rich Archbold, a former editor hired by Allison, in one of the many tributes on the *Press-Telegram* website. "He had ink in his veins and will leave an unforgettable legacy."

Many of the tributes spoke to Allison's interest in new technology and gadgets, his active lifestyle and

love of adventure—and how they all came together with cars.

"Larry was all about the future," wrote columnist Tim Grobart. "He loved fast cars—he had the fastest car we've ever been in, a Mercedes S600, and it was like being shot into space when he took us for a spin in it. And he kept on top of every Apple product. He had all of them."

Allison also served at one time as president of the *Associated Press Managing Editors* and was involved with several philanthropic groups, including the *United Way* and the *Museum of Latin-American Art*.

He is survived by his wife, **Patricia**, and their son.

1981

**Peter Almond** and his springer spaniel Henry completed a five-month, 1,237-mile walk across the length of Great Britain in October. The pair raised more than \$15,000 for charity while following the "Land's End to John O'Groats" route, considered to be

the longest distance across the island.

"I could not have done this without being managed from home by my wife, **Anna**, who was with me and son Nick on our Nieman year, or without Henry being such a gosh-darn loveable pooch," Almond wrote in an e-mail to *Nieman Reports*. "He opened doors and wallets from hundreds of well-wishers to donate to our chosen charity—Hounds for Heroes, which trains assistance dogs for injured British service and emergency service personnel."

Almond chronicled the experience in a blog at [www.henryandpetesverylongwalk.com](http://www.henryandpetesverylongwalk.com).

Currently a freelance writer living in the United Kingdom, Almond has worked as a reporter at the *Cleveland Press*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. His book "Aviation: The Early Years" was published in 1997; he is looking for a publisher for two more aviation books and a novel.

**Rose Economou**, a broadcast journalist turned professor, died on October 2nd at her home in Oak Park, Illinois. She was 65.

## The Arab Press: Exploring Challenges and Possibilities

Egyptian journalist Sabah Hamamou, speaking from Cairo via Skype, brought a sense of immediacy to a panel discussion about the Arab press when she shared news of an initiative to launch an independent TV channel.

A group of activists, journalists and intellectuals plan to raise money for the channel through an initial public offering. Hamamou, deputy business editor at Al-Ahram newspaper in Cairo, told the audience gathered at the Lippmann House in late October.

Hamamou was one of three panelists at a forum, “The Arab Press: Can It Keep Up With Political Transformations?”, moderated by **Melissa Ludtke**, NF ’92, editor of Nieman Reports. Joining Hamamou were **Rami G. Khouri**, NF ’02, a veteran observer of the Arab news media who writes an internation-



Columnist Rami G. Khouri, NF ’02, Tufts University anthropology professor Amahl Bishara, and Egyptian journalist Sabah Hamamou (speaking via Skype) discuss the future of the Arab press. *Photo By Jonathan Seitz.*

ally syndicated column, and Amahl Bishara, an anthropology professor at Tufts University who studies news coverage of Palestine.

Hamamou said the fall of President Hosni Mubarak’s regime in February fueled hopes for rapid change. Yet the storming in October of a television station by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to prevent a well-known columnist from appearing on a popular show demonstrated that the country still

has a long way to go in moving out from under Mubarak’s shadow.

Hamamou and Khouri agreed that the news media’s lack of credibility in the Arab world presents a major challenge for journalists. Hamamou said the state-run media reported that Tahrir Square was empty at a time that other broadcasters were covering the protests there. Khouri said the media’s

“massive loss of credibility” is acute among people under age 29 who make up half of the population in the Arab world.

He singled out Al-Jazeera, based in Doha, Qatar, for the quality and relevance of its reporting and said that it is crucial for journalists to be a party to the writing of new constitutions in Arab countries so they can advocate for provisions that stipulate protections for the media. ■

A native of Chicago’s South Side, Economou had her first brush with the national spotlight as a 25-year-old “advance man” for presidential candidate Ed Muskie’s primary campaign in 1972. It was such an unusual position for a woman in those days that she and a female colleague were profiled in Time magazine.

After that foray into political campaigns ended unsuccessfully, she moved into broadcasting with jobs at local stations in Richmond, Virginia and Washington, D.C. In 1977 she

returned to Chicago with CBS affiliate WBBM as a field and documentary producer and worked on the Emmy Award-winning 1978 report “Agent Orange: The Human Harvest.” Following her Nieman year, she moved to CBS News and became a producer, working with Charles Kuralt on “CBS News Sunday Morning.”

Economou also worked on a number of documentaries for PBS’s “Frontline,” producing an episode called “Not One of the Boys” in 1984 about the growing number of women in politics. She also

produced documentaries about gang violence and social welfare, launched a documentary company called With Heart Productions, and had been working on a film about food safety for several years.

“She was a person more passionate about social justice, more passionate about honest journalism, more passionate about the belief that every individual should be totally involved in the world around them than anyone else,” said **Hodding Carter III**, NF ’66, a longtime friend.

## A.C. Thompson of ProPublica Named Winner of 2011 I.F. Stone Award

By Jonathan Seitz

A.C. Thompson, whose reporting from post-Katrina New Orleans revealed hate crimes and police brutality, is the winner of the 2011 I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence.

A reporter with ProPublica, Thompson spent a year and a half investigating two cases involving racially charged attacks that occurred in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005. As a result of his reporting in 2007 and 2008, federal prosecutors opened cases against a private citizen and five police officers.

In his acceptance speech at Boston University (BU) in October, Thompson said the prominent story line in the media after Katrina was that poor blacks were wreaking havoc in the already ravaged city. He did not find this to be the case when he went there.

“Some of the worst criminals were wearing uniforms,” he said. “The police force was the biggest gang in town.”

This became most apparent in the case of Henry Glover. Beginning



A.C. Thompson, a reporter at ProPublica, talks about his post-Katrina investigations. *Photo by Lisa Abitbol.*

with only a vague report alleging police misconduct, Thompson reconstructed the final hours of Glover’s

life, when he was shot, beaten and left to die in the back of a car that was set on fire to destroy his remains.

That the burned-out car was still sitting on the levee three years later was just one of the many signs that Thompson was entering a different world when he arrived in New Orleans. He admitted that when he arrived, he “was like Bambi ... just a naïve child.”

“This is a crazy place,” he recalled thinking. “You kill people, burn up their bodies, and just leave it there. ... In other places, you at least try to hide the evidence.”

His other major investigation involved Donnell Herrington, a black man who survived two close-range shotgun blasts while he and two companions were walking through a white neighborhood to reach a Coast Guard evacuation site.

Thompson tracked down the shooter, a white man named Roland Bourgeois, Jr., and uncovered a general air of impunity for white-on-black violence.

These stories are emblematic of

In 1990, she joined Columbia College Chicago as artist in residence and became a journalism faculty member two years later. A well-known and beloved figure for students, she remained with the school until her death.

“We had students sobbing in the hallways,” said **Nancy Day**, NF ’79, chairwoman of the Columbia Journalism Department. “She had an impact because she really went out of her way to be nice to the students. She would always go the extra mile for them.”

The school has designated a scholarship in her honor to help students pay for international travel programs,

something that she had championed during her career.

1988



Dale Maharidge’s latest book in his long-running collaboration with photographer Michael S. Williamson is “Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression,” published by University of California Press in June.

The two met in 1980 when they both worked at The Sacramento Bee—Maharidge as a newly hired cops reporter and Williamson as a staff photographer, recently promoted from copyboy.

Two years later they started on their first book, “Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass,” documenting a declining steel town and hobos traveling the country on freight trains. “It’s not a story we set out to do. It found us,” writes Maharidge, now an associate professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University.

They continued chronicling the state

Thompson's interest in marginalized figures suffering at the hands of authority, an interest rooted in his time teaching writing to juvenile offenders before he became a journalist.

"I saw kids who seemed deeply traumatized, many of them nearly illiterate," he said. "Their parents had failed them, their schools had failed them, and now the correctional facility was failing them."

That experience followed him to the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the alternative weekly that hired him in 1998. There, editor Tim Redmond, one of his most important mentors, taught him the skills of investigative journalism. Redmond told him that understanding how government works would "open up nodes of information or data or facts," Thompson said. "It's buried in a dusty file cabinet in some government office ... it's not online, and you can't Google it."

Established in 2008, the I.F. Stone Medal honors the life of investigative journalism I.F. Stone. The award, administered by the Nieman Foun-

dation and its Nieman Watchdog Project, is presented annually to a journalist whose work captures the spirit of independence, integrity, and courage that characterized I.F. Stone's Weekly, published from 1953 to 1971.

This year's selection committee, chaired by John R. (Rick) MacArthur, president and publisher of Harper's Magazine, also included Robert Kaiser, associate editor and senior correspondent for The Washington Post, and **Patricia O'Brien**, NF '74, a journalist, novelist and author. The group made their selection from recommendations presented by distinguished journalists who, by design, remain anonymous and serve for just one year.

The person who nominated Thompson for the award wrote that Thompson is "intelligent, measured, courageous and resourceful, displaying a skepticism of authority and a non-sentimental concern for the underdog and a readiness to dig deeply into public records and interviews to uncover instances of injustice—in short, a perfect candi-

date for an I.F. Stone Medal."

Documentation was a driving force for Thompson in New Orleans. He waded through almost a thousand autopsy reports from the weeks after Katrina, reports that he had to sue the state to obtain. Being awash in so much death did have an effect on him, Thompson acknowledged during a question and answer session moderated by **Maggie Mulvihill**, NF '05, director of the New England Center for Investigative Reporting at BU.

"Journalism in America is not a dangerous profession," he said. "But when you do stories about life and death ... the emotional toll is more dangerous than anything else."

Speaking to that toll, he shared one of the most gruesome aspects of the Glover case: While his charred skull was visible in crime scene photos, it was never cataloged with the rest of his remains and has yet to be found.

"I'm still wondering about Glover's skull and where it went," he said. "Whether anyone will ever return it to his family." ■

of the working class, traveling 500,000 miles and following some families for nearly 30 years, a project that led to "Someplace Like America."

The book gained a sense of urgency in the economic downturn of 2008 when, even though officials bragged about avoiding another Great Depression, unemployment and foreclosures were on the rise. "My Great Recession is your Great Depression if you lose your job and your home," Maharidge writes. "The oxymoronic term 'jobless recovery' is an insult to those who have been laid off."

Their work gained attention from Bruce Springsteen, who writes in

the book's foreword that "Journey to Nowhere" inspired part of his album "The Ghost of Tom Joad."

Maharidge and Williamson have now collaborated on a total of six books, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning "And Their Children After Them: The Legacy of 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men'—James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Rise and Fall of Cotton in the South," in which they revisited the families profiled in the 1941 classic. Each has also had two books of his own published.

**Will Sutton** will be teaching at Grambling State University in Louisi-

ana during the spring 2012 semester as one of four inaugural Reynolds Foundation visiting business journalism professors.

Sutton is a former deputy managing editor at The (Raleigh, N.C.) News & Observer and he served as a past president of the National Association of Black Journalists. He previously taught journalism at Hampton University in Virginia.

1992

**Melissa Ludtke** is now the executive editor of the Schuster Institute for

## Examining the Latin American Press

The state of press freedom in Latin America was the subject of a conference at Harvard University on November 18.

Cosponsored by the Nieman Foundation, the Harvard Kennedy School's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, the conference brought together leading Latin American journalists and scholars to discuss the challenges of reporting in the region.

Topics ranged from the threats faced by reporters—abduction, intimidation and death chief among them—to pressure from government

officials or media moguls, and the absence of legal protection and press freedom laws. There was also discussion of innovative solutions to some of those problems, including how blogs and other online media can make a difference.

Nieman Fellows spoke at the conference, including **Mónica Almeida**, NF '09, editor at El Universo in Ecuador; **Fernando Berguido**, NF '12, publisher of La Prensa in Panama; **Boris Muñoz**, NF '10, Venezuelan journalist and fellow at the Carr Center; **Pablo Corral Vega**, NF '11, a constitutional lawyer and photojournalist from Ecuador; **Claudia Méndez Arriaza**, NF '12,

editor of El Periódico in Guatemala; **Carlos Eduardo Huertas**, NF '12, investigations editor at Revista Semana in Colombia; **Rosental Alves**, NF '88, director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas; **Graciela Mochkofsky**, NF '09, editor of El Puercoespín in Argentina; and **Juanita León**, NF '07, editor of La Silla Vacía in Colombia. The event was coordinated by **Stefanie Friedhoff**, NF '01, special projects manager at the Nieman Foundation.

The conference was live-streamed on the foundation website. Archived video is available at <http://nieman.harvard.edu/LatAmPress/>. ■

Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University, after stepping down as editor of Nieman Reports at the end of November.

She had been the magazine's editor since 1998, and in those 13 years produced 54 issues, expanding its scope and global reach in print, bringing forward-looking topics to its pages in stories told and shown by experienced journalists. She transitioned Nieman Reports to a vibrant digital presence, advanced such initiatives as Professor's Corner, and worked with her colleagues on social media outreach through Facebook, Twitter and a weekly e-mail newsletter.

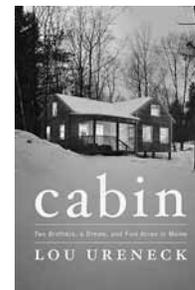
Ludtke started in journalism in the 1970's, after graduating from Wellesley College. She freelanced as a "go-for" at ABC Sports, then was hired as a reporter for Sports Illustrated, where in five years there she worked on the TV/radio, professional basketball and baseball beats. In 1977 she became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against Major League Baseball that gained women the same access that their male colleagues had to interview baseball players in locker rooms. She then worked for

CBS News and Time magazine, as a researcher in New York, and as a Time News Service correspondent in Los Angeles and Boston. She covered the Summer Olympic games and presidential campaign in 1984, and then took on the social policy beat with stories revolving around children and family issues.

After her Nieman year, she was a visiting scholar at Radcliffe College and a Prudential Fellow at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. There, she worked on her book, "On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America," published by Random House in 1997 and University of California Press in 1999. She remains engaged in community service, as a board member for Families With Children From China, New England and as mentor to a Cambridge-based youth group that is part of the Jane Goodall Institute's Roots and Shoots program.

In 2010, she received the Yankee Quill Award from the Academy of New England Journalists, recognizing her lifetime contribution to excellence in journalism. [See her editor's note on page 3.]

1995



**Lou Ureneck's** second nonfiction book, "Cabin: Two Brothers, a Dream, and Five Acres in Maine," was published this fall by Viking. In it, he chronicles the trials and tribulations of

building a vacation home in Maine with the help of his brother. Ureneck, who teaches journalism at Boston University, explains, "I was looking for a project that would return me to a better frame of mind following a series of personal setbacks. The work of cabin-building turned out to be the medicine I needed. It was mentally absorbing and at times physically demanding. I liked the feel of a hammer and wood chisel in my hands. The clean fir-scented air was a tonic."

The memoir tells three stories, Ureneck writes, "the cabin's construction, the relationship I have with my younger brother Paul, and the important place

that nature has played in my life since my childhood. The stories mingle, cross and diverge—the pages are partly memoir and partly a reported essay about carpentry, New England history, and the people of rural Maine.”

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### 1997

**Robert Blau** has been elected to the Pulitzer Prize Board. Blau has been the managing editor for special projects and investigations at Bloomberg News since 2008 when he left The (Baltimore) Sun where he was managing editor for four years. Before that, he spent nearly 20 years at the Chicago Tribune as a reporter and editor. He led the team that won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for “Gateway to Gridlock,” an investigation into the failings of the airline industry.

He served as a Pulitzer juror in 2010 and 2011, judging the investigative reporting prize and serving as chairman of the public service jury, respectively. Other Nieman Fellows on the board include **Eugene Robinson**, NF '88, and co-chairwoman **Ann Marie Lipinski**, NF '90, curator of the Nieman Foundation.

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### 1998

**Phillip Martin**, a senior investigative reporter for a Boston public radio station, has been named the 2011-2012 Margret and Hans Rey/Curious George producer.

Since joining WGBH Radio in 2010, Martin has done several in-depth series on critical issues affecting Greater Boston. Among them is “Sexual and Human Trafficking in the Boston Area,” a four-part series in which Martin reported on the smuggling of people for forced labor or sexual exploitation. It was recognized with an Edward R. Murrow Award in the Audio Investigative Reporting category.

Made possible through a bequest from the late Margret Rey, co-author of the “Curious George” children’s books, the award enables a WGBH

producer to work in an area that reflects Rey’s broad interests. Martin wrote that he views the recognition “as an affirmation of the work that the WGBH Radio news team has been doing collectively in reporting on social justice and innovation in New England. We are a small news department that is growing, both in terms of influence and actual size.”

His work incorporates what he learned in Michael Sandel’s courses about justice during his Nieman year.

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### 1999

**Malou Mangahas** won two Philippine National Statistics Month Media Awards in October.

She won the Outstanding Award for Print and Broadcast for her work with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and as the host of GMA TV’s “Investigative Documentaries,” which won in the broadcast TV category.

The award citation highlighted a number of reports Mangahas produced for the PCIJ, where she is executive director. Those included an investigation into President Benigno S. Aquino III’s campaign funds for the 2010 elections and an explainer on how to report cases of tax fraud.

The awards are part of the National Statistics Coordination Board’s effort to promote the value of statistics.

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### 2001

**Kirstin Downey** is the new editor of FTC:Watch, a bimonthly publication that tracks the Federal Trade Commission and other government regulatory agencies.

In a message about the new position, Downey wrote that it offered “topics I find fascinating, a paid subscription base that is not dependent on advertising, [and it] comes out twice a month so that I have time to reflect, and not just react. It’s got a small staff but we’re growing.”

Downey was a business reporter at The Washington Post from 1988

to 2008. During her final three years there, she wrote extensively about the growth of risky new kinds of mortgages that threatened homeowners and the nation’s economic system. In 2008, she shared in the Pulitzer Prize awarded to the Post’s staff for its coverage of the shootings at Virginia Tech.

She left the Post to finish “The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR’s Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience,” which was inspired by work she did during her Nieman year and published in 2009 by Doubleday. It was named one of the best nonfiction books of 2009 by the Library of Congress, the American Library Association, the Los Angeles Times, and NPR.

In 2010, Downey was a writer and interviewer for the bipartisan Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, which investigated the causes and repercussions of the mortgage meltdown.

In addition to her work at FTC:Watch, Downey is writing a biography of Queen Isabella of Castile, a controversial ruler who transformed Spain from a poor and fractured nation into a global powerhouse and who, as Christopher Columbus’s sponsor, forged the first links between Europe and the Americas. The book is to be published by Doubleday.

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### 2008

**Iason Athanasiadis** was one of six journalists honored at the 2011 Anna Lindh Mediterranean Journalist Awards in Monaco this October.

He received one of two Special Awards on Documentary and Social Change for an article called “Revolution Game Over?” published by The Majalla in February. In the piece, he compared the revolution in Egypt to earlier revolutions in Greece, Spain and Portugal and cast suspicions on the Army’s role in the protests that eventually forced President Hosni Mubarak to resign.

“Did it [the Army] carry out a coup d’etat? Hijack a legitimate revolution?” writes Athanasiadis, a freelance journalist and photographer. “Or did

## Namibian Niemans Forge a New Connection

After spending the past 26 years as editor of *The Namibian*, **Gwen Lister**, NF '96, has stepped down from the newspaper she founded. For a successor, she selected Namibia's only other Nieman Fellow, **Tangeni Amupadhi**, NF '07, who took over on October 1.

"I would be lying if I said that the past 26 years have always been easy, because they haven't," Lister said in her farewell speech. "Now is not the time for historical introspection, but the long and short of it is that I have loved every minute of leading this newspaper for nearly three decades."

Lister founded the paper in 1985 while the country was still under apartheid rule. As editor, she was the sole director of the paper. Though she has stepped down from the editorship, Lister will remain with the company as chairwoman of the new board of trustees and executive director for new business



At a ceremony announcing Tangeni Amupadi, NF '07, as the new editor of the *Namibian*, outgoing editor Gwen Lister, NF '96, handed over a symbolic set of keys. *Photo by Henry van Rooi.*

development and media.

Before taking the reins, Amupadhi worked alongside Lister for six months as editor-designate. He had worked for the paper from 1999 until 2004 when he left to found the magazine *Insight Namibia*. He has also worked for the Namibia Press Agency as well as the *Mail & Guardian* in Johannesburg, South Africa.

In her farewell, Lister praised the staff for surviving a ban by

the government and for managing to find financial stability with a business model that was unprecedented in Namibia. Now the nation's biggest-selling daily paper, it is owned by Free Press of Namibia Ltd., the sole shareholder of which is the nonprofit Namibia Media Trust. This structure frees the paper from the dictates of government, political parties, or corporate ownership.

Looking forward, Lister warned against

"other contenders and pretenders in the newspaper industry" and said that the paper would continue to face challenges to its survival.

"To Tangeni, you are inheriting the best and the worst of worlds," she said. "This is a huge responsibility not for the fainthearted, and I know [you] are willing, eager and able to shoulder it and take *The Namibian* to greater heights." ■

we witness a psychological operation whereby what appeared to be a pro-democracy movement was used as a Trojan Horse by a military anxious to safeguard its business interests?"

The awards, given by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, honor reporting that crosses cultural lines.

2010

**Alejandra Matus** is back in Chile after completing a master's in public

administration at the Harvard Kennedy School. In her first job since returning to her native country, Matus worked with researchers at University Diego Portales School of Journalism and the investigative journalism project CiperChile to produce a website that tells the real-life stories that inspired a TV miniseries. After each episode of TVN's "Los Archivos del Cardenal" ("The Archives of the Cardinal"), a fictionalized account of the Catholic Church's efforts to protect the rights of victims of human rights abuses during the Pinochet regime, the website

posted documents and press coverage from the era to educate people about the real crimes.

Matus has covered human rights abuses in Chile for most of her career. She had to leave the country from 1999 to 2001 after the government issued an order for her arrest and banned "The Black Book of Chilean Justice," her book about corruption in the courts.

"It has been exciting as well as horrifying," Matus wrote in an e-mail to Nieman Reports about the job. "I know the subject of human rights violations

quite well, because I worked many years reporting on that, but going back to the archives and interviewing people still in deep pain has impacted me as if it was the first time I heard these stories.”

2011

**Waheed Abdul Wafa** became executive director of the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University in October after working for The New York Times in its Afghanistan bureau for 10 years.

The mission of the center is “to enhance nation building by providing reliable information to policy planners, strategy makers, program implementers and future leaders of Afghanistan,” according to its website. The center was established in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1989 and moved to Kabul in 2006. It also maintains a mobile lending library that brings books to 32 of the country’s 34 provinces.

An essay about Wafa’s work was posted on the Times’s “At War” blog. In it, reporter Adam B. Ellick recounts Wafa’s path to journalism after his old job—removing landmines—ended abruptly with the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

That October he traveled across the frontlines and met several journalists, eventually being hired by The New York Times as an interpreter. During his tenure at the Times, he served the paper in many roles, including translator, fixer, security consultant, cultural interpreter, and bookkeeper, as well as reporter on more than 300 stories.

Ellick also writes about a particularly memorable encounter from Wafa’s Nieman year when he met a CIA agent who told him, “We can’t do anything more in your country.”

“That was my biggest lesson in 10 years,” Wafa said. “No one else can give us peace. Afghans should do something.” ■

## Annual Report Chronicles Foundation’s Growth

The past year has been a time of transition and new beginnings for the Nieman Foundation. **Bob Giles**, NF ’66, retired as Nieman curator, wrapping up more than a decade at the helm, while **Ann Marie Lipinski**, NF ’90, came aboard with fresh ideas on ways to expand the scope and reach of Nieman programs and serve the needs of journalists worldwide.

Nieman Reports expanded its online presence with a redesign that spotlights news about journalism and the work of Nieman Fellows and contributors and highlights the latest issue as well as its archive. The Nieman Journalism Lab also redesigned its site and launched Encyclo, an encyclopedia of the future of news, and Fuego, a Twitter bot that tracks the most-discussed

topics related to the future of journalism. Nieman Storyboard established Editors’ Roundtable, which comments on craft and the storytelling aspects of current narrative projects, and “Why’s this so good?”, a weekly feature in which a guest writer chooses a classic narrative and explains what makes it extraordinary. Nieman Watchdog increased its social media presence to better share the site’s many thought-provoking articles, and hosted an online petition calling for accurate infographics.

Read the 2011 Annual Report online to learn more about the many exciting developments at the Nieman Foundation, including news about Nieman Fellows, conferences and journalism awards: [www.nieman.harvard.edu/2011annual-report/](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/2011annual-report/). ■

## Submissions Sought for Journalism Awards

**The Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism** honors investigative reporting on stories of national significance where the public interest is not being served. The application deadline is January 13. The Nieman Foundation will present the Bingham Prize, which includes a cash award of \$20,000, in April. For more information, visit [www.nieman.harvard.edu/worth-bingham-prize/](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/worth-bingham-prize/).

**The Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers** encourages fairness in news coverage by daily newspapers in the United States. The application deadline is January 20. The cash prize is \$10,000 for the award recipient and \$1,000 for each of the top two finalists. The application can be downloaded at [www.nieman.harvard.edu/taylor-family-award/](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/taylor-family-award/). ■

## Fellowship Application Deadline

Nieman fellowships are awarded to journalists of accomplishment and promise who come to Harvard University for a year of study. The application deadline for U.S. and global health journalists for the 2012-2013 academic year is January 31. More information about the Nieman Fellowship program is available at [www.nieman.harvard.edu/nieman-fellowships/](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/nieman-fellowships/). ■

## END NOTE

AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELI REED

# A Way to Understand the World



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This image became the opening spread of a photo essay in *Life* magazine about the Million Man March in 1995. I wanted to show how large the crowd was, and the three men of varying ages and taste in hats worked for me, too.

I always have a camera on me or very near so I can keep up a visual diary of my life. Long before my first photographs were published, I explored my surroundings through my photography. It has helped enlarge my understanding of the external world in ways that I perhaps would have

found difficult if not for the camera in my hands.

When I embark on creating a photographic essay, all of my energies are propelled in the direction of finding the core of what is happening inside the story and the heart of my subjects. Nothing is more important to me

than sitting down with the elements of truth that transport me to places that I have not visited before. The legendary documentary photographer W. Eugene Smith, once stated, "Let truth be the prejudice!" I believe that is still a good way of doing work that is important to me. ■



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An hour after President Obama took the oath of office in Washington, D.C., I looked at the woman standing next to the poster and I felt that she was thinking what I was thinking: The new president was not going to have an easy time.

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*



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Along with three other photographers and our driver, I was caught in a rocket attack in 1983. We had to make a run for it under heavy shelling in Tripoli, Lebanon.

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*



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A friend in the military took me to Ground Zero on September 12, 2001. Walking through the rubble, we met an undercover police officer who had lost 11 of his friends.

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*



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After making a portrait of this Guatemalan soldier under tense conditions, I entered a village where a mass funeral was taking place. I was informed that he and his men were responsible for having eight people taken out of a funeral wake and killed. The word was that the people had voted the wrong way in the last election.

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*



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The three-day Atlanta Pop rock festival that took place in Byron, Georgia in 1970 attracted as big a crowd as Woodstock had the previous year.

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*



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A mother with her children, sleeping in the car to escape her violent husband, subsequently found help at a shelter for battered women and their children.

*Eli Reed, a 1983 Nieman Fellow, has been a photojournalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin since 2005. His photography career started in 1970. Over the years, Reed, a member of Magnum Photo since 1988, photographed around the world for numerous publications, including The New York Times, National Geographic, Time and Life magazines. He has produced two photography books, "Beirut: City of Regrets" and "Black in America." The text for this photo essay was adapted from what Reed wrote upon hearing that he was the recipient of the Lucie Foundation's 2011 award for Outstanding Achievement in Documentary Photography.*

*Photo and text by Eli Reed.*

# Tom Wicker, Political Columnist for The New York Times, Dies at 85

**Tom Wicker**, NF '58, a columnist and Washington bureau chief during 31 years at The New York Times, died of a heart attack on November 25th, at his home near Rochester, Vermont. He was 85.

As a White House correspondent for the Times, he came into prominence for his coverage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. He was the paper's only reporter in the presidential motorcade through Dallas.

The following year, Wicker succeeded James B. "Scotty" Reston as chief of the Washington bureau. In 1966 Wicker started writing the "In the Nation" column, which was syndicated to scores of newspapers. It appeared two to three times a week until he retired in 1991.

In a remembrance published in the Times, **Anthony Lewis**, NF '57, called him a "first-class" political columnist: "shrewd, well-informed, with a sure sense of Washington."

From his perch on editorial and op-ed pages, Wicker, a Southern liberal with a streak of civil libertarianism, passed judgment on presidents and



Tom Wicker, shown here at Attica prison in 1971, spoke and wrote with force and conviction. *Photo by Michael Evans/The New York Times*

politicians from both sides of the aisle. He had his own detractors in politics—with a spot on one of Nixon's "enemies lists"—and in journalism. Some thought he was too outspoken.

Born and raised in North Carolina, Wicker rooted for the underdog. During an uprising at the Attica prison in upstate New York in 1971, prisoners invited him in as an observer and mediator. They had been impressed by a sympathetic column he wrote about the death of a black militant in San Quentin prison.

In a video tribute, **Danny Schechter**, NF '78, who interviewed Wicker for a documentary about the JFK assassination, praised him for showing "that you could move from this so-called neutrality/objectivity of being a Times man to a concerned citizen, where he actually spoke out on a lot of important issues."

Before joining the Times in 1960, Wicker was the associate editor of The (Nashville) Tennessean and had worked as a reporter and editor for newspapers in North Carolina, including nearly a decade at The Winston-Salem Journal.

He wrote some 20 books, including political thrillers and murder mysteries under the pen name Paul Connolly as well as nonfiction. He examined race relations in America, the legacies of former presidents, the shortcomings of the press, and, in "A Time to Die," the Attica prison riot.

He is survived by his wife, **Pamela**, a son and daughter from his first marriage, two stepdaughters, and a stepson. ■

## Grateful for Well-Timed Words From Wicker

By Alvin Schuster, NF '67

Tom and I worked together in the Washington bureau of The New York Times for some six years—I was there when he arrived in 1960 from Nashville and he was there when I left in 1966 for the Nieman. And in between we had that historic day in 1963 when Tom was in Dallas covering the Kennedy assassination and I was running the news desk operation in Washington in the absence of our two bosses, Scotty Reston and Fendall Yerxa.

Tom's voice on the phone with me that day was what one would expect—calm, professional, leaving no

doubt that the copy to come would be remarkable and so it was. I remember all that, of course, but I also remember a conversation with him of far lesser global significance. It was the day when Tom, then Washington bureau chief, suggested that I apply for a Nieman, an honor he himself had enjoyed a few years before.

And so I applied, joined the class of 1967, and when I returned with visions of reporting from overseas, Tom went to bat for me with New York editors with an opening in London on their hands. Tom's letter to New York

(a copy of which I have filed away) endorsed me for the opening, noting that I was "just back from a Nieman fellowship" and eager to shift from editing to writing.

Two months later, thanks to the Nieman, and to Tom and other supporters, including another Nieman, **Tony Lewis**, then London bureau chief, I was on my way there to begin a 12-year journey on the Times foreign staff. What more could one ask of a talented, wonderful colleague—his support for a Nieman and his support for a job in London. Not bad, Tom. ■

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