

WRITERS ON WRITING

The Eye of the Reporter, The Heart of the Novelist

By Anna Quindlen

There's always a notebook in my purse. I learned my lesson one day many years ago when I found myself at the scene of a crime, taking notes on the back of checking account deposit slips. Before I was a novelist, I was a columnist; and before I was a columnist, I was a reporter; and the reporter is always there, jumbled amid the Altoids, the keys and the lipstick, there forever in the notebook. The connection between the two incarnations, between the newspaper and the novel, is clear to me but confusing to readers. Here is the question they ask most often, the one that underlines the covertly snobbish way in which we delineate the professions from the so-called arts: How did you manage to make the leap from journalism to fiction?

I used to answer flatly that there's not much difference between the two, that good writing is good writing wherever you find it. But that answer really threw people into a swivet, speaking to their deepest suspicions about both lines of work. It turned out that when I was writing about the people I actually met and the places I actually went, the enterprise was enshadowed by reader suspicion that we reporters made everything up. But when I made things up as a novelist, readers always suspected I was presenting a thinly disguised version of the facts of my own life.

So the facts were assumed to be fiction, and the fiction fact. Go figure, as the guys at Katz's delicatessen used to say. The quotation is somewhere in one of my old notebooks; I know it's true. The truth is that the best preparation I could have had for a life as a novelist was life as a reporter. At a time when more impressionistic renderings of events were beginning to creep into the news pages, I learned to look always for the telling detail: the Yankees cap, the neon sign in the club window, the striped towel on the deserted beach. Those things that, taken incrementally, make a convincing picture of real life, and maybe get you onto Page 1, too.

I learned to distinguish between those details that simply existed and those that revealed. Those telling details are the essence of fiction that feels real. The command of those details explains why Charles Dickens, a onetime reporter, has a byline for the ages.

I learned, from decades of writing down their words verbatim in notebooks, how real people talk. I learned that syntax and rhythm were almost as individual as a fingerprint, and that one quotation, precisely transcribed and intentionally untidied, could delineate a character in a way that pages of exposition never could.

All of us in journalism know of the times we've read a neat little quotation that seemed to sum up the entire point of a story, and we thought, almost reflexively, "It's piped," reporter's jargon for "It's invented." It's just too pat, too flat, too homogenized, too perfect at one level, too impersonal at another. That happens in fiction, too, the line of dialogue that sounds like a speech or a stage direction or a maxim instead of a sentence. You can hear the fake with a reporter's ear.

I learned in newspapers to make every word count. All those years of being given 1,200 words, of having the 1,200 pared to 900 at 3 o'clock, of having to take out another 100 to shoehorn it into the hole in the layout: it teaches you to make the distinction between what is necessary and illuminating and what is simply you in love with the sound of your own voice.

A novelist doesn't write to space, of course; 80,000 words, 100,000, it's up to the writer to say when the story is done. Some have a harder time than others. The most common shortcoming I find in good novels nowadays is excess; many of them should be 50 pages shorter than they are. I learned how to cut where cutting is commonplace, swift and draconian.

In that same place, crowded and noisy and redolent of adrenaline in the late afternoons, I learned about writer's block, too. People have writer's block not because they can't write, but because they despair of writing eloquently. That's not the way it works, and one of the best places to learn that is a newspaper, which in its instant obsolescence is infinitely forgiving.

Some days you plod, some days you soar, but always you churn out copy on demand, whether you feel the muse or not. (Where is the muse, by the way? Does she ever show up?) Occasionally you hit it, grinning behind the nominal privacy of your partition like a Mardi Gras mask.

Jacques Barzun once wrote: "Convince yourself that you are working in clay, not marble, on paper, not eternal bronze: let that first sentence be as stupid as it wishes. No one will rush out and print it as it stands." Journalism is the professional embodiment of that soothing sentiment.

Of course, it is also the professional embodiment of fact-finding, and that, more than anything else, is why a switch to fiction by a journalist perplexes readers and even colleagues. "I could never make it up," one of the very best reporters I've ever known said to me a little accusingly. But that notion of untrammelled invention becomes illusory after a while, even in the most freewheeling novel. (Although, as a former reporter, I undoubtedly find a thrill in being able to take a name that is unwieldy and simply to change it, poof!)

If you manage to build characters from the ground up carefully, make them really real, your ability to invent decreases as their verisimilitude grows. Certain people will only behave in certain ways; certain behaviors will only lead to certain other behaviors. The entire range of possible events decreases as characters choose one road, not another. Plot is like a perspective drawing, its possible permutations growing narrower and narrower, until it reaches a fixed point in the distance. That point is the ending. Life is like that. Fiction is like life, at least if it is good.

I always wanted to write fiction. It said in my high school prophecy, “Ambition: to write the great American novel.” (I’m just reporting the facts here, mortifying as they may be.) I only went into the newspaper business to pay the rent. And then I discovered that, for a Catholic girl with napkin-on-the-lap manners, the professional obligation to go places I was not welcome and ask questions that were intrusive and even rude was as exhilarating as work could be.

I drank bourbon at noon in the police shack and got spit on at town meetings by folks who couldn’t inveigh without expectorating. I rode in a search-and-rescue plane in a snowstorm, and I rode in a limo with the mayor in high dudgeon. Geez, what a deal.

I taught myself a shorthand of my own invention, and I use it still. But now, memory being what it is, or more often isn’t, my notes are the ideas for a new novel that occur to me as real life eddies around me. “Rd hr,” means one character will be a redhead, and “Viet Wr?” means another may have fought in that conflict. It’s just that the scene I see is not, as in my past life, in Flatbush or on Fifth Avenue.

The story, the people, the neighborhood: they’re all in my own mind. But the notebook still helps to keep the details fresh and true, to hold the quotations clear as consonants, to provide those little touchstones that will rescue me from the slough of writer’s despondency. I am a reporter of invented stories now, but no less a reporter because of that.