

Special Correspondents

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I gave up writing fiction earlier in the year, and I don't really want to talk about it. I've not wanted to talk about it so much in fact that this is easily the second or third time I've told people I don't want to talk about it. It's an unusual situation because I've written stories since I was four, and even now, in a slightly odd way, I'm being paid to build fictions, to make things up for a living.

I am, after all, a journalist.

Ahthankew.

But fiction itself is something which I'm taking time away from. My stories have touchstones, hell every writer's does and if you don't believe me then Aaron Sorkin has a huge array of troubled, intellectual, frequently Catholic humanitarian father figures to tell you exactly how right I am. Those touchstones are uniquely personal, and a lot of mine have to do with just that, journalism. I remember being utterly entranced by two pieces of TV when I was a kid. One was a mini-series called *A Dangerous Profession* about the events in the Philippines, told through the eyes of a journalist and the other was *Film...* Oh I think it was '84 that I first saw.

For decades, the BBC have run a half hour film review show, buried away late at night where no one could see it because if they did, they might (gasp) watch it. Called, imaginatively enough *Film 2012* right now, for most of my life it was presented by Barry Norman, a very good, very educated film journalist whose taste is the exact polar opposite of my own. It honestly got to the point where I could tell I was going to love a movie if Barry hated it. Which is what good critics do, I now realise, they give you triangulation points on the map, give you an idea of what you might like. What I knew I liked, was certain, I liked, was writing, was being a journalist, because then you got paid to write! Paid to watch movies! And then write about them! If there was tea as well, this was officially the best job ever!

There was, and is, frequently tea.

What I find, more and more, is that the joy I get from writing, I get from writing non-fiction. These endcaps, and we're about four hundred words into new material already, are a perfect example. I love to talk, I love to communicate, I love to hear how pop culture, how stories, have wrapped

around people and plugged into their brains. One of my best friends, for example, passionately defends the *Star Wars* prequels because he thinks they're

- A) Great
- B) Science fiction costume drama

And

- C) Shut up

I disagree, but I can see his point. The wacky theory in *The Invisibles* about how *Speed* is actually about evolution? I can see that too. Writing about stories is more fun, for me, than writing stories because I love the process, I love the pledge, the turn and the prestige equally, the elegance of a well turned phrase, the surprise of a neatly delivered twist. I love this stuff because I love the artistry and engineering of fiction, and I'm big enough to admit I love it because I'm not good enough at it to make a living doing it myself, I'm a door man, I'm a master of ceremonies, the person who explains how great someone else's work is and the good thing about that is I'm invisible. The bad thing? I'm invisible.

There are fringe benefits though, like the fact that if you step back far enough? You can see each plot, each story, as a strand of a greater narrative; history. Sometimes history is an ocean and all we can do is ride the swell and hope we come out the other side. The Cuban Missile Crisis was like that, I'm told. I distinctly remember my father telling me he was rehearsing for a play at that time, and when one rehearsal broke up, everyone said goodbye, fully expecting to never see one another again. The ocean swelled, and rose and... didn't break.

Sometimes, and I say this with a whole day's experience boogie boarding, the ocean just carries you along and sometimes it dumps you on your head because it can. But other times you can see the individual waves, the individual currents. Sometimes if you time it just right you can crest the wave and surf it all the way in, carried along by history to further up the beach, to somewhere better, or at least somewhere new. The people who get to do that tend to be important to the great scheme of things. Politicians, artists and celebrities all carried along on the tide of history, all heading in towards the shore, all surfing on the backs of a billion different stories.

Sometimes though, it's one of us.

In the crypt at St Paul's is the one monument there that made me cry. It's to the Special Correspondents who fell in the Sudan conflicts of 1883, 1884 and 1885. There are seven names on it, and an engraving of an archetypal English imperial figure, boots, trousers, military tunic, helmet.

And notepad and pen.

I'll never be a war correspondent and I don't want to be, I'm actually rather allergic to violent death. But the people who go head first into trauma with their eyes open, ready to record it for others? That's a special kind of bravery. It takes a lot to describe trauma as you're experiencing it, to walk into the heart of chaos and report what you see there. It's not as visceral, not as real as armed conflict but the intellectual dimension it has, the struggle to describe the indescribable and do so impartially? That's startlingly courageous. The quiet bravery of the observer is what lies at the heart of genuinely great journalism for me, cut through with some of the most important questions we can ask:

What happened?

Why did it happen?

Could it happen again?

And, more pertinently to me;

What does this story mean?

What could it mean?

How do you tell it?

Seven names on a wall, a pith helmet, a notepad and a pen. The Special correspondents. Here's to you, ladies and gentlemen, the critics and the hacks. Here's to the journalists. Here's to my people.

