



Photo of Elinor Burkett by Loli and Rex Productions.

# *Scholar–Practitioner Q+A . . .*

## An Interview with Elinor Burkett

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Mark Kramer’s “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” may very well have been written with an Elinor Burkett in mind. A U.S. journalist with nine books to her credit, Burkett’s narrative journalism tackles social and cultural taboos with rigor, integrity, and a good dose of investigative reporting that serves as a study in how to intimately tell a story, while grounded in facts that are, as Kramer suggests, comprehensive and detailed.<sup>1</sup> I interviewed Burkett recently over WhatsApp (an in-person meeting wasn’t possible), shortly after she arrived back in the United States from a visit to Zimbabwe, where she has made a second home and where I first met her nearly a decade ago.

Burkett’s journalism has also led her into other media-related areas: documentary filmmaking (one of which, *Music with Prudence*, earned her an Oscar in 2010 in the best documentary short subject category),<sup>2</sup> longform journalism, general and specialized reporting, and the odd disquisitory op-ed. She made the switch to journalism in the 1980s. Already in possession of a PhD in Latin American history, and on faculty for thirteen years at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, Maryland, she went back to school to earn her master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University. This resulted in her somewhat cautious, by her own admission, entry into journalism in the late 1980s as an intern for the *Miami Herald*. The internship paid off, and she was hired by the newspaper, writing features for five years. Since then, Burkett has written for any number of publications, including the *New York Times* and

*Rolling Stone*, while also holding Fulbright professorships in Zimbabwe and Kyrgyzstan, seamlessly blending scholarship and journalism.

Burkett is no stranger to controversy. Some would argue that she courts it quite intentionally as a journalist. Her first foray into narrative journalism, coauthored with Frank Bruni, was their 1993 book *A Gospel of Shame*,<sup>3</sup> which focused on the sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church. Two years later saw her excoriation of the AIDS industry that highlighted how politics and greed rode roughshod over the prevention of what was still very much a deadly disease. In 1998, she turned her gaze both inward and outward, trying to make sense of why women would subscribe to conservative politics. The result was her 1998 book, *The Right Women: A Journey through the Heart of Conservative America*.<sup>4</sup> Burkett's most telling (and perhaps prescient) narrative journalism is her 2004 text, *So Many Enemies, So Little Time: An American Woman in All the Wrong Places*.<sup>5</sup> This is a story that provides insight into how at least one part of the world (the different -stans of the old Soviet Union, as well as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Russia, China, and Mongolia) viewed the United States, and how Burkett navigated the tensions and politics of a post-9/11 world that harked back to the Reaganesque views of the old evil empire, even as the term *axis of evil* became the new shorthand for places cast in the roles of villain by a good portion of the Western world. At the same time, she seems to relish the messiness that must come with having a big heart and being compelled to tell a complex story with integrity. Because Burkett, for all her toughness, tenaciousness, and contrarianism, is someone with a heart as big as the sky—ask the many young people from Zimbabwe who have gone on to great things academically with her support. She somehow always has place for one more person who wants to learn. With this in mind, I asked Burkett what propelled her into giving up academic tenure to pursue a career in journalism. [The interview was edited lightly for clarity.]

**Elinor Burkett:** When I turned forty-five, I realized that I was bored. At that point I had been in the classroom eighteen years, teaching pretty much the same thing every fall and spring. I felt like I was getting stale. I had a sabbatical year coming up and decided to try out something new. I wasn't sure what, so I asked everybody I knew what they thought I should do instead of academia, and a friend of mine, who was a journalist, said, "You're curious about everything and like to do research. Give journalism a try." I had no sense at that point that that's where I would wind up. I just went to journalism school to try it out. But I liked it and then took an internship at the *Miami Herald*, which I loved. I don't believe in burning bridges, so I took leave from my academic job and quit only after I'd been at the *Herald* for a

year. Friends in academia were horrified. Who gives up tenure? But tenure felt like a trap. Too many people stay teaching because they have tenure, and it gives them job security, not because they love it. I no longer did. So why would I keep teaching just because I had job security?

**Callie Long:** Your Wiki page describes this move as a dramatic turn. Is that how you would describe it?

**Burkett:** No. I don't know who wrote that, but I didn't. It felt almost like a natural progression. I am a storyteller. That's what a historian is. That's what a teacher is. So, becoming a journalist wasn't a dramatic break. It just led me to tell different kinds of stories—more immediate ones—in a different way.

**Long:** In *So Many Enemies, So Little Time*, you write that journalists at heart are storytellers. But what I really like is that you own up to the fact that stories tend to get messy on you. What do you mean by that?

**Burkett:** What I mean is that journalism is the first draft of history. But it's only the first draft. It's time sensitive, so you can't do the wider research. You don't—you can't—know where the story is going to end, which is the great advantage historians have. You're just capturing a moment. So, for example, just after the U.S. pushed the Taliban out of Afghanistan, I flew into Kabul. There was a moment—I write about it in *So Many Enemies*—where I was going to interview a woman for the fifth or sixth time. I'm walking up the steps of her apartment building with my interpreter and another woman in the building opened her door and quietly asked my interpreter whether or not it was true that I was an American. When he said yes, she came out and kissed my hands in gratitude.

In the very first draft of the American invasion of Afghanistan, women were really grateful. But the story doesn't stay stuck there. The story developed. People came to resent the United States. To be angry with the United States. Six months later, that same woman might have spit at me. But I was capturing an early moment that was true for its time. When I'm writing history, I'm working from documents that tell me what happened after the moment a journalist would have captured.

Also, as a historian, I work from material that is not changed by my intervention. When I'm interviewing a real human being, that person has emotions towards me as the interviewer, and that changes what the story is. Maybe the person wants to please me. Maybe the person is angry with me because of my nationality. Maybe the person just doesn't like the color of my hair, or whatever. So, it's harder to account for the prejudices that can creep in either by time or by personal intervention when you're doing journalism.

**Long:** You have this narrow window in which you are crafting the story. If you're doing regular reporting, that narrow window isn't such a constraint. In

longform journalism—and I’m thinking for instance of your opinion piece in the *New York Times*, “What Makes a Woman?”<sup>6</sup>—you still have a big enough window to get the story done. But when you set out to write a book, and time just marches on relentlessly, then that window opening is very narrow. Can you talk me through the transition from regular reporting to writing a book?

**Burkett:** Any journalist who goes into a story without personally accepting the possibility or even the likelihood that you might be overtaken by events, and thus be wrong and have egg on your face, is being ridiculous. Because it will happen. And there’s nothing you can do about it. So, the most you can do is do the best you can do and grin and bear it if you if you’re overtaken by events. Think about all the people writing journalism who anticipated that Hillary Clinton would become the president of the United States and then they got a dramatic egg on their face because every poll was wrong. You just have to accept it as something that happens.

**Long:** Has that happened to you?

**Burkett:** Has it ever happened to me? Not that I can recall, but if my memory serves me well, it’s an accident. It’s not because I’m the world’s greatest journalist. It’s because I’m lucky. Avoiding being overtaken by the movement of history is not necessarily a matter of being good or persistent, which is what gets you great stories or interviews. Things happen. You cannot do anything to insulate yourself from that reality. My attitude always has been, you do the best you can, you make the best call that you can, and sometimes the call is going to be wrong.

**Long:** Listening to you, there’s a good dose of the historian in there, not just the journalist talking.

**Burkett:** That’s one of the things that’s always been different for me. When people interview journalists for jobs, they [the journalists] are often asked if they think of themselves more as writers or as reporters. I have always objected to this question, because my answer is, neither. I think of myself as a thinker. When I am asked to estimate how long a piece will take me, I always put in thinking time. Not just writing time and reporting time, but thinking time. So, any time that I am working on something, I give myself a good amount of time to think about it, to reread, to reconsider it. And that’s the historian in me. And the academic in me, too.

**Long:** You mentioned earlier the notion of emotions in play and how people respond to you, and it reminded me of Mark Kramer’s “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” in which he discusses eight rules, one of which is that “literary journalists develop meaning by building upon the readers’ sequential reactions.”<sup>7</sup> Do you have your readers’ [reactions] in mind when you’re writing and not only the people you are interviewing or writing about?

**Burkett:** Absolutely, as a narrative journalist. My goal is to serve my readers. If I am writing something and don't consider who they are, then I am not serving them very well. So, for example, when I worked in Miami, I was dealing with a group of pretty conservative readers, and I needed to make sure that I wrote to them in a way consistent with who they were. If I know what your prejudices are, then I am in a better position to elicit the reaction that I want.

**Long:** What would you say to those who say that it's manipulative, given the trend to disparage mainstream journalism?

**Burkett:** What's wrong with manipulation? No, I'm sorry. That's a little too facile. My goal is to communicate. If I speak French to a Greek speaker, I am not communicating. Why is what I do any more manipulative than speaking French to a French speaker? All I am talking about is using language and techniques to communicate more effectively with people. I have a real example. When I was writing my book about Golda Meir,<sup>8</sup> I had to decide going in whether I was writing for people who knew a lot of Israeli history or people who knew nothing about Israeli history, because Golda is the history of Israel. Is it manipulative to make sure that I'm writing in a way that will make sense to people? I was very careful in that book to balance how much I told readers about Israeli history because I didn't want to bore them. Or, if I'm writing for people whom I know will be instinctively anti-Israel, I'm going to be a little bit more thorough in explaining things in a way that might make them more sympathetic to what I'm writing about because I know that they have prejudices that they might not even know about that need to be addressed. That's being hyper-conscious of who your audience is and communicating in a way in which they can understand you.

**Long:** Is this about keeping faith with your readers?

**Burkett:** They might not see it as keeping faith with them, especially in this new hyper-partisan era in journalism where keeping faith with your readers seems to mean telling them only what they want to hear. But it's not my job just to tell people things that they want to hear. I am a kind of contrarian—both by nature and professionally. My job of keeping faith with them is often to show them that their views are too narrow or show them where they are wrong. I don't know whether or not readers will always consider that I'm doing them a favor. But that's my definition both of my job and of keeping faith with them.

I experienced that most keenly when I was writing about conservative women—conservative intellectuals, militia women, ordinary right-wing women for *The Right Women*. How was I—a New York Jewish leftie—going to gain their trust? And I did it by telling the truth. I introduced myself,

opened up about my background and beliefs, and explained that I didn't get how, in the twenty-first century, a woman could be *not* be a progressive. Then I asked them to help me understand. And these women opened up and spent hours with me, not trying to convince me but trying to help me understand. And they succeeded to a remarkable extent. That doesn't mean they brought me around to agreeing with them. But they opened up a window into their lives, their world view, their thinking. And my job was to record and transmit that.

I don't think I could have done any of this if I weren't confident enough in my own beliefs to be able to move past them and if I didn't believe in my very core that their stories have the right to be told.

**Long:** You identify yourself as a contrarian. One of the questions that I had for you is that you're absolutely not afraid to touch and even of grab hold of the third rail when it comes to contentious topics. Are you compelled to do this? And I'm thinking specifically about your narrative journalism on HIV, on consumerism, and on the sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. These are all third-rail concerns.<sup>9</sup>

**Burkett:** It just feels to me that if I am not trying to make the world a better place, then what is the point of being a journalist? Why not just go out and, like, find some job making a lot of money? I am from a family tradition where the notion of doing something to better the world was actually important. So, I guess I could write about fashion, if I knew anything about fashion, which I don't. But who would that help? What would that change? And I know that at the end of the day, when I'm [lying] on my deathbed, I need to be able to say to myself, well done. And I am not sure how I could wind up saying that if all I'd done was report about fashion.

And it's not just about the topics I hone in on. I am a lifelong kind of lefty liberal, but it annoys me and always has when people come up with facile assumptions about things or come to facile conclusions. I have always thought that it was my job to disabuse them of facile thinking. That's what makes me a contrarian in the eyes of many.

**Long:** And opting for narrative journalism certainly isn't the easy road to follow, because it is hard work.

**Burkett:** It is a huge amount of work . . . if you do it well. If you're intent on being thorough, it's a gigantic amount of work. But I need to add that it is also immensely, emotionally rewarding; and it's really, really, really fun. We don't talk a lot about fun. But if you look at my life and the things that I've done, and the places I've gone and the people I've met, who's had more fun than me?

That overwhelms the moments when I wondered whether I would get

out of Afghanistan alive or my days being followed by the secret police in Mauritania or the gazillion times I've been blasted by readers of so-called experts for not crafting my work in keeping with their agendas.

**Long:** If you have to recount one particular story that stands out above all other stories, do you have a story like that? What is that that one story that just kind of makes your heart race?

**Burkett:** That's a good question. I don't think there's one. There is the AIDS story I did in Cuba. There was a professional satisfaction to it of having been able to do something that no journalist had done, which was talk the Cubans into letting me go into a sanatorium for HIV patients. It was both that kind of ego satisfaction, the fun of meeting very interesting people, and because the story itself was morally and politically complicated. Here was a situation where, as an American with my American prejudices, I was horrified that they were locking people up just because they had HIV. But then I got to Cuba and couldn't help but feel that things were complicated. It wasn't just that there were many people in the sanatorium who agreed with what the Cuban government had done to them, but that in the context of a relatively poor island with few resources struggling to contain a potential epidemic, it actually made sense, especially given that the patients were living much better than most Cubans on the streets and being cared for better than most Cuban-American HIV patients I knew in Miami. So, I wound up thinking that the answer to my question about what this all meant wasn't easy. That was extremely gratifying, and it was an important article.

I guess the other story that stands out was Afghanistan. Just after the Taliban left, I went to interview educated women who had been trapped behind the burqa. I wound up spending an extraordinary afternoon with a woman who'd been a news anchor on TV before the Taliban took over. She admitted to having gone a bit crazy after she was forced off the air and into isolation at home. But she told the story of waking up the morning that the Taliban left. Music was playing, which was shocking. But she didn't quite believe the nightmare was over until an engineer from the radio station knocked on her door and said, "They're gone and there's no one to announce it on the air. Do you dare?" And she said, "Let me get my coat." Giving voice to the realities these women lived was a real privilege.

**Long:** Both these stories speak to what you said earlier, that there are no easy answers, and that they both push back against what you term "facile thinking," given how complex they are.

**Burkett:** Yes. No easy answers [is] important to me. You really have to buck the tide to get them in print. They demand more reporting time and more length for writing. So, complexities are a real battle these days.



**Long:** How would you describe your voice for the scholars and journalists who may read this Q&A? I can think of some adjectives. But how would you describe it?

**Burkett:** *How* would I describe my voice? It's pretty personal. I have friends who are journalists who try to have a very impersonal voice—to as much as possible not be there. I have never tried to do that. I, as a person, am in a sense very present.

I also think my voice is nuanced and that over time, I got better and better at making things complicated. I have had many editors who criticized me for this. But I like complications because they are essential to the truth. Readers are not stupid, and we do sense that if something's complicated that it's probably more likely to be true, because they know that [everybody's] life is messy.

**Long:** It strikes me as a deeply reflective voice, one that is underpinned by courage. I'm thinking specifically about your book about the AIDS industry, *The Gravest Show on Earth*.<sup>10</sup>

**Burkett:** That's a lovely compliment.

**Long:** I do think it takes enormous courage to write about the kinds of things that you write about.

**Burkett:** Neither the topics, nor my take, was likely to win any popularity contests in certain circles. But if you want to win popularity contests, don't become a journalist.

When I moved to Miami to work at the *Miami Herald*, I knew before I got there as an intern that I wanted to report on AIDS. I had done a lot of work reading the newspaper and I thought that they were undercovering AIDS, and Miami was, as you know, hit hard by the epidemic. It took me two years to convince them to let me do this. So, it was not exactly a great career move. And then I wrote plenty of things that people within the world of AIDS would have preferred I ignore. But I had the advantage of age. I wasn't a twenty-two-year-old just starting in journalism. It's easier to be courageous when you're a little older and don't care whether you are popular, either internally or externally. Obviously, I had to keep my bosses happy enough that they would let me do my work. You do that by excellence rather than by pandering.

The greatest challenge for a journalist like me has always been sussing out and then conveying the truth. But the question always is: Whose truth am I looking for, since the Truth, with a capital T, rarely exists. In Afghanistan, I wasn't looking to tell the truth of the male leaders of the Taliban. I was trying to tell the story of educated women trapped behind their burqas. I told *their* truth. But that wasn't the Truth of the men, or even of many other women.

And then there's the problem of keeping *my* truths from overwhelming the truth of the people whose stories I am trying to tell, and that's both a problem of my own personal biases and my cultural biases. I've been lucky to have lived and worked in numerous different cultures. That experience, in addition to my training as a historian, makes me keenly sensitive to the difficulty journalists from a given era or culture have in keeping the prejudices of their times and backgrounds out of their work. So, when I was writing about the AIDS camp in Cuba, for example, I felt a typically American revulsion at the idea of treading on individual liberty. But my job was to overcome that revulsion because I was dealing with a society in which the collective good weighs much more heavily than it does in my society. What, then, did the decision of the Cuban government look like to Cubans? How did that decision affect Cuban society? Those truths had to weigh more heavily than my prejudices.

Getting to those truths, obviously, isn't always easy because people don't necessarily know what their truths are, or they have more than one truth, or because they are suspicious of interviewers. I've been successful because I believe that people like telling their stories and feel that I am really interested, which is not a pretense on my part. I really am interested. And people sense that I really want to tell their stories, not their stories filtered through my biases.

**Long:** Does this still hold true for you?

**Burkett:** There are things I'd like to write about but can't. For example, I would love to be writing about Zimbabwe since I've spent much of the last fifteen years there. But courageous or not, I cannot do it because it has implications for too many people. In Zimbabwe you could get hurt. There are times that I cannot be courageous. So, I am not doing a lot of reporting now.

But I still write some opinion pieces, and I'm perfectly content if they make me unpopular. I am thinking of my op-ed about Caitlyn Jenner, "What Makes a Woman?" I knew I would get blasted for it, and I didn't care. Too many journalists and opinion writers are not willing to say things they believe because it's politically incorrect. And political correctness is dangerous both for journalism and for society.

But this is a terrible time to be a journalist. Everything is so ugly at the moment that I don't know how I would be responding if I were writing daily journalism now. I watch my friends who do it, and it's pretty ugly. It is not unusual for my friends who are working journalists to get death threats from readers. Or just vile emails. Heaped with vile emails. Or, I hope you die. I don't know how you work in that environment. I'm not doing a lot. I mean, I do the occasional piece if I feel strongly about something, but I'm not doing much anymore.

**Long:** But you're still training journalists? What do you tell them, given our so-called, and still-contended, post-truth society that relies and appeals to emotion at the expense of truth and facts?

**Burkett:** I'm pretty much retired, but I still, in an ad hoc way, train and teach journalists. I get many calls from young people, or I meet them, and some say they want the life I've had and ask how to get it. And my response to them—because I'm a person of brutal honesty—is you can't. The world has changed too much, and journalism has changed too much, and I don't think I do anybody any favors by encouraging them to think that they can have the kind of career that I had. It's not open to them. Outlets simply don't have, or won't spend, the money necessary to do my kind of work.

When it is a more formal situation, talking about how you do journalism, I preach old-fashioned values. The truth has gone out of fashion in journalism—you're not supposed to talk about the truth because there is no one truth. But you strive for the closest thing you can possibly get to it. That is the biggest thing that I emphasize. I'm not sure that we are doing ourselves or anyone else any favor by giving in to the difficulty of finding the truth. We have to try.

My other major piece of advice for young people is: Shut up and tell the story. Stop worrying about crafting things to emphasize your perspective. Trust your readers. So, get out of the way of your story and let its power rise.

Ultimately, what has guided me is an abiding belief in the power of well-told stories to move the world. They move ordinary people to change their attitudes, to donate money, to pressure their political representatives. They reshape how individuals think about themselves. That power is why those with political agendas try to censor stories or rewrite history. Stories can be dangerous, after all.

Not all journalists think of themselves as storytellers, of course. A growing number are entrenched in advocacy journalism, which I don't think of as journalism. I'm also trying to change the world, but I do it by showing readers how complicated the world is and by taking them inside the lives and the realities of people they don't know and experiences they haven't had.

**Long:** And where does narrative journalism fit into this picture?

**Burkett:** To my mind, narrative journalism is the best vehicle when properly done. I can write a story that includes every fact about HIV, from how it spreads to how many people have died and the current medical thinking. But bland information doesn't move people. On the other hand, if I take you inside the life of one person, then I can give you all that information and simultaneously help you identify with people who are struggling. When I was in Miami, I spent a lot of time writing pieces about populations of

people with HIV that my readers hadn't thought about. I did a piece about young people struggling with HIV by focusing on a single young man named Pedro Zamora who went on to be quite a famous person because he was on the first season of the *Real World* [MTV's reality television series]. I did a piece about elderly people struggling with HIV. And those people, those pieces, had an enormous impact. Those were forms of narrative journalism that not only give people information but help reshape their attitudes. It's the same reason that people like novels. Narrative journalism gives people the chance to experience somebody else's life and thus to feel empathy.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 21–34.

<sup>2</sup> *Music by Prudence*, directed-produced by R. Williams and produced by E. Burkett, available from the Library of Congress Catalogue, <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=84406&recCount=25&recPointer=0&bibId=18247741>. Also available on YouTube, Short Film Winners: 2010 Oscars Announcement. Best Documentary short announcement of nominees Starts at 04:14. Announcement of nomination of *Music by Prudence* by Roger Ross Williams and Elinor Burkett starts at 04:42. The winner, *Music by Prudence*, is announced starting 04:56. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaHEj3agOYA>.

<sup>3</sup> Burkett and Bruni, *A Gospel of Shame*.

<sup>4</sup> Burkett, *The Right Women*.

<sup>5</sup> Burkett, *So Many Enemies, So Little Time*.

<sup>6</sup> Burkett, "What Makes a Woman?"

<sup>7</sup> Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 31.

<sup>8</sup> Burkett, *Golda*.

<sup>9</sup> The use of the term "third rail" as metaphor is typically associated with contentious issues—ones that are so risky to tackle publicly that they invariably result in failure. It is a phrase most closely associated with politics in the United States and refers to the actual third rail of some electric railway systems that come with a high-voltage charge that can result in electrocution when touched. See Safire, "Third Rail," 20.

<sup>10</sup> Burkett, *The Gravest Show on Earth*.

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### Filmography

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