

A Literary Journalism Master Collects His Work

The Detective: And Other True Stories

by Walt Harrington. The Stacks Reader Series. Sager Group, 2021. Paperback, 116 pp. US\$14.99.

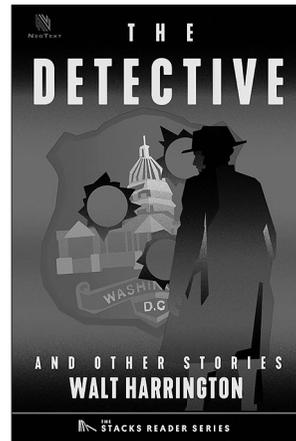
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Anyone who has taught literary journalism and magazine and feature writing over the past twenty-five years knows Walt Harrington's germinal textbook, *Intimate Journalism*, as a bible for students of longform writing. Harrington is a master craftsman who worked both as a staff writer for the *Washington Post Magazine* and as a University of Illinois professor (and head of the journalism department). To the ten books he has written or edited, Harrington now has added this gem, a collection of eight of his *Washington Post Magazine* pieces from 1986 to 2011 that stand the test of time.

Dedicated "to the memory of Matt Harrington, my son and my friend," the book will inspire both students of literary journalism and practitioners alike. It's hard to identify a single favorite in this anthology because the subjects are equally compelling and the research and writing impeccable. "The Detective" gives a fascinating, inside view of a black homicide cop's daily challenges, evoking not only the hard physical work of investigating murder cases, but its concomitant mental and emotional drain: "His numbed heart is but an early warning" (23).

In "The Reverend Comes Home," a final illness brings an aged, once-powerful community icon into the care of his daughters. Harrington gives us a finely limned picture of the way of all flesh. Unavoidably we must face the "bittersweet blessing" (77) represented by the older generation's demise, a kind of rehearsal for our own.

"The Mystery of Goodness" explores the Christian agape that propels a young Harvard Law School graduate, Bryan Stevenson, to forsake money and prestige to rescue those sentenced to the death penalty. "The people who end up on death row are always poor, often Black," Stevenson tells Harrington. "And almost always they had bad lawyers—real estate lawyers who never handled a capital case and who had to be dragged screaming into the courtroom. In one case, the judge actually sent the defense lawyer out to sleep off a drunk" (59). But it's not just simple outrage at racial and economic inequalities that motivates this young lawyer. Harrington's multifac-



eted investigation concludes that the lawyer's compassion and decency flow from a cavernous well of spirituality. Stevenson's "deepest mission . . . is not to save the lives of convicted men, but to live in such a way that his own life is a question posed to others" (73).

"Born to Run" and "Dubya and Me" explore the lives of the forty-first and forty-third presidents of the United States, respectively. The first begins:

George Bush is a political phenom in reverse. He has made a life of mythic proportions seem somehow trivial, and he cannot understand why. He was the most lovable boy, always. President of his class at prep, president of everything else, too. Never a bad word about him. A war hero—not like John Kennedy, but an undisputed war hero. Skull and Bones, Phi Beta Kappa at Yale. Cushy job offers up the ying-yang. George said no. He packed his wife and infant son into an old, red Studebaker and hit the road for god-awful, rough-necking West Texas—and drilled a fortune in black gold. Then Congress, the U.N., China, the CIA, Saint Reagan's weep. Most Americans view him darn favorably too, according to the pollsters. So why the mean quips? "There's no there there." Why the David Letterman gag lines? Why the *Doonesbury* attack on his manhood?" (123–24)

Profiling the Bushes and other figures such as Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks, and Jerry Falwell over the years has undoubtedly led Harrington to this perspective on history, that it "is composed of significant and less significant moments, the trouble being that we often don't know at the time which is text and which is footnote. Yet when it comes to presidents, even footnotes are worth recording" (148). His nuanced profile of "Dubya" benefits from this scrupulous fact-gathering.

"A Narrow World Made Wide" communicates the complex mystery of artistic creation as practiced by Rita Dove, a former U.S. poet laureate. Step by step, Harrington reveals Dove's creative process: "Rita is loose now, playing—with words, images, punctuation, enjambment and stanza size. She writes a line, walks out onto it, looks ahead, continues or steps back, tries another. For the first time, she can hear the rhythm of her poem before its words are written, as in a song that doesn't yet have lyrics" (44). Here Harrington gives us a most insightful account of literary creation, illuminated by his personal understanding of the craft of writing.

Aptly, Alex Belth's introduction to the book starts with this quotation from Harrington's book, *Artful Journalism*:

The artfulness required to do intimate journalism is not mostly a God-given skill, but craft. It's crucial to think that way. Otherwise, we make the mistake of assuming that some people just have the knack. Some people do have the knack, but much of artful journalism, whether or not it is about ordinary people, is simply hard work. (xxi)

Sage advice indeed, especially for our students who struggle to realize their own agency as writers.

Both learners and masters of literary journalism will find much of interest in Belth's introduction, a Q&A interview with Harrington that begins with his description of his high-school self as "kind of a knucklehead," until the school newspaper adviser asked him to succeed as editor his successful older sister (xxvii). That first

interested him in writing, though he first studied sociology in college, eventually earning a master's degree in that subject, followed by another in journalism. Harrington recounts early influences from reading *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* and writers such as Jimmy Breslin, Hunter Thompson, Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion. Also key to his development was David Halberstam's work, especially *The Best and the Brightest*, as well as Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *Final Days*. "Reading these books I realized that journalism could be more than bureaucratic political coverage; it could actually be unraveling the human dimensions of power politics and policy" (xxviii).

The final piece, dating from 1987, showcases Harrington's multifaceted talent in a moving essay on fathers and sons. Here, he shares what he calls "a startling insight: If I am still resolving my feelings about my father, then when I was a boy my father was still resolving his feelings about his father" (173). As Harrington demonstrates, this generational tie is durable and influential.