



Long-form nonfiction author and professor Stephen G. Bloom.

Scholar-Practitioner Q+A . . .

An Interview with Stephen G. Bloom

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In Iowa City, there may be no greater honor than to be enshrined in the city's Literary Walk among some of the world's most celebrated authors, including Flannery O'Connor, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Irving, among others.¹ The 2011 selection of Iowa journalist and professor Stephen G. Bloom for inclusion among the world's finest prose stylists with Iowa connections² recognized Bloom's ample talents. The decade that followed gives evidence of more of the same. Today, Bloom's at the height of his storytelling powers, the author of six critically acclaimed, narrative nonfiction books, including the most recent, *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes* and *The Audacity of Inez Burns*.³

Bloom's craft is a direct descendant of the New Journalism, as evidenced by these books and his earlier volumes, *Tears of Mermaids, The Oxford Project, Inside the Writer's Mind, and Postville*.⁴ Bloom was an award-winning journalist for newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Dallas Morning News*, before becoming a professor of journalism at the University of Iowa in 1993. He was the 2020 national winner of the Distinguished Teaching in Journalism Award, conferred on one professor annually by the Society of Professional Journalists.⁵

Ethnographic participant-observer journalism is Bloom's expertise. *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes* (University of California Press, 2021) is the story of teacher Jane Elliott and the Blue-Eyes, Brown-Eyes Experiment she made world-famous, using eye color to simulate racism. *The Audacity of Inez Burns* (Regan

Arts, 2018) is a biography of a San Francisco libertine who, from 1906 to 1951, performed fifty thousand hygienic, albeit illegal, abortions before being prosecuted by district attorney Pat Brown, who went on to become California governor and U.S. presidential hopeful. *Tears of Mermaids* (St. Martin's Press, 2009) traces a single pearl from a diver's hand to a woman's neck. *The Oxford Project* (Welcome Books, 2008) tells the intimate stories of one hundred residents in an insular, small Iowa community over a twenty-three-year period. *Postville* (Harcourt, 2000) details an escalating culture war between ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jews and Lutherans in a rural meatpacking town.

Bloom started his career as a reporter and editor for the *Brazil Herald*, an English-language daily in Rio de Janeiro. With editorial latitude to match a wild atmosphere of experimentation, the *Brazil Herald* drew a raft of eager and hungry journalists, including twenty-five-year-old Hunter S. Thompson, who began defining his craft at the newspaper.⁶

Bloom's writing epitomizes how journalistic reporting and research can be wedded to narrative storytelling in ways that unlock mysteries of the past, not just for their own sake but to illuminate core truths about the human condition today—particularly by unearthing the roots of social tensions and strife in unforeseen locations.

On July 19, 2022, we sat down for a wide-ranging conversation about narrative nonfiction, Bloom's craft—how he practices and perceives it—as well as today's market demands.

David O. Dowling: How was your career in literary journalism influenced by daily reporting?

Stephen G. Bloom: I got into daily journalism at the tail end of the era that came to be known as the New Journalism. After I returned to the states from Brazil, I started working for the old women's sections, the place where there'd been society news, the bridge column, Dear Abby, sewing tips, recipes, basically the home ec section. If you want to plan a great Fourth of July picnic, here's how you make potato salad. There was a sudden rush to degenderize those newspaper sections and hire men to write for them. This was in the wake of Clay Felker of the *New York Herald Tribune*, in the wake of Tom Wolfe writing daily journalism, which really was experimental, longform magazine writing. It was an exciting time. At the time, the *Dallas Morning News* was involved in a terrific newspaper war with the afternoon paper, the *Dallas Times Herald*, then owned by the *Los Angeles Times*. Burl Osborne, the *News's* executive editor, told the staff that only one paper would survive, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be the *Times Herald*. If the *Times Herald* sent two reporters to cover a story, the *Morning News* sent three. Anything to beat the competition.

A lot of money was at stake during this era when I became a feature writer, trying to inject into the paper male-interest stories. I wrote stories about cigars, prostate cancer, circumcision, farts, pro wrestling, shoes, shaving, solo flying, con men, grifters. It was a good run that propelled me to the *Los Angeles Times*, where I covered criminal courts in the San Fernando Valley. In LA in the mid-'80s, a single homicide didn't make it into the newspaper unless it was a slow news day or the victim was a famous person. Most homicides were drug-related, which didn't interest the editors. It had to be double, or triple, homicide. An amazing palette, really, to work from. At the time, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* were considered the two American papers for writers. The photo and layout editors hadn't taken over yet, and the papers were still run by word people, who gave you *s-p-a-c-e*. Stories could run three thousand, to six-to-seven thousand words, often more, with three or four jumps, which got readers inside the newspaper. The ad people liked that. I wrote about greed, sloth, depravity, and decrepitude—daily fare in any criminal court. Pissed-off wives who bludgeoned their husbands with baseball bats; husbands who chopped up their wives, stuffed them in oil barrels, and dumped them off of Long Beach. Philip Marlow, Raymond Chandler stuff. It was wonderful grist for a book-writer-in-training. I got to write about unsung heroes and forgotten victims. That gig led me to become a feature writer for the *San Jose Mercury News* at the dawning of Silicon Valley. The *Mercury News* was owned by a quality chain, Knight Ridder, and had the largest classified Sunday section in the world. It was fat; you needed a bulldog to lift it from the sidewalk to the breakfast table. Companies like Hewlett-Packard were hiring sandal-wearing nerds with the strange title of “software engineer.” Once again, a terrific palette for a writer. Unwittingly, I was creating a corpus of work that would lead me to the University of Iowa, the epicenter of writing.

Dowling: You came to journalism at a time when journalism itself was ideally opening up new channels, like you're saying, through the women's sections of these papers, into all new terrain and territory, part and parcel to do competition with magazines like *Playboy* and *Esquire*, unabashedly male-interest magazines. The rise of the New Journalism and Tom Wolfe's movement was motivated in part to somehow compete with these magazines by featuring articles that were appealing and attractive—particularly cast as longform with an engaging narrative arc—yarns that readers couldn't put down.⁷ There was this opening up of the publishing industry for news media that began to evolve out of narrow categorical boxes, specifically of soft news being gendered female. Then, suddenly, the realization struck that there was a big, untapped market that was quite lucrative. There's a wonderful book by Thomas Schmidt called *Rewriting the Newspaper*, which is about daily news

journalism as the source of the narrative journalism movement, particularly arising from places other than Tom Wolfe.⁸ Instead, Schmidt locates a locus or germ of the movement in the Style Section of the *Washington Post*. This was daily journalism appealing to male readers beyond baseball scores, politics, or business news.

Bloom: My journalism idols, the reporters I aspired to become—Jimmy Breslin, Pete Hamill, Mike Royko—were all these muscular, two-fisted reporters with attitude. Lots of it. They cast themselves as champions for the little guy. I could do that, too, writing for these revamped women’s sections that had become daily magazines. Their names got updated to Style, Today, or Living. I could experiment with dialogue, something I loved. I could come up with bizarre story ideas which would never fly today. An example: I pitched a story tracing a year in the life of a rental tuxedo. An old trope, really, giving life to an inanimate object. I went to an old-fashioned tailor, who also rented tuxedos, and said, “Let me cut you a deal. Would you keep track of the tuxedo jacket I’m going to rent?” It was tuxedo 92146. That’s what the jacket said: 92146. And the tailor asked, “Willya put the name of my shop in the article?” “Absolutely,” I said. So, every couple of weeks, I’d check in with the tailor and ask, “How’s our tuxedo doing?” And he’d reply, “Oh, it came back with a little bit of blood on the lapel.” Two weeks later, it came in ripped. Three weeks later, the tailor says, “Sheesh! It came back smelling like vomit.” A week later, a lipstick mark on the collar. He kept track of everyone. By the end of the year, I had fifty stories. I’d been able to contact almost every renter of that tuxedo jacket, No. 92146.

The last person who rented the jacket told me he had a wonderful time in the jacket but insisted I not use his name. He was quite insistent. I’m loathe to give anonymity to anyone for lots of reasons. But this guy really piqued my interest. When I asked him why he didn’t want me to use his name, he said, “Because I went on a cruise with the tuxedo but without my wife.” Imagine someone paying a writer today to keep tabs on a tuxedo for a year? Maybe that story could run today, but it’d have to have a cartoonish visual element to make it work. It’d probably have to be animated on a website. I was able to give life to a crummy old, limp tuxedo through just the power of words.

Dowling: Much of why you remember this work is because your editors were not cutting you off at 250 words. You have achieved the status of an American author who excels at book writing today precisely because you had creative space, or as Melville described it, “plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in.”⁹ This space is important not only to allow for great storytelling and writing but also for politically efficacious pieces that hold those in power to account.

Bloom: You have to use that space wisely. No room for boring. No thumb-sucking. No navel-gazing. Get to the point and get to it fast. You can go off on tangents, but only if they're essential to revealing a larger, more holistic, universal stage. You know about the coverage of the Altamont Rolling Stones concert in 1969, right? *Rolling Stone*, the magazine, ran a piece that was a 20,000-word story written by a corps of reporters who were at the concert.¹⁰ They go through all the rigor of straight journalism—what the cops said, what the sheriff said, what witnesses said. Then, suddenly without warning, [it is as if] the magazine writers interrupt themselves and declare: “That’s all bullshit. *This* is what happened. We were there; we covered it.” *That’s* all bullshit. This is what happened. We were there; we covered it. This is what *really* happened. It’s a historic moment in American journalism. Pivoting from third-party, so-called “objective” reporting—to telling us the truth. Not coincidentally, the dead man at Altamont was a Black man stabbed and stomped to death. It took fifty years for another Black man, George Floyd, to get murdered by a cop in Minneapolis, for us to hear what *really* happened. It took fifty years for the media to step up to the plate. Finally. Not to use police spokesmen, press releases, flaks, strat-comm manipulators of the truth. Whether they know it or not, journalists today have those *Rolling Stone* reporters to thank for giving us our marching orders: That’s all bullshit; *this is what happened*. That’s the credo. Our motto. That’s why journalists do what they do. At least, that’s what they do if they’re any good.

Dowling: Given that credo, how do you come up with original ideas?

Bloom: I don’t walk around with earbuds. I don’t check my messages. No texting, no emailing. I’m not scared to be alone; I welcome the solitude. Wherever I am, my head’s on a swivel. I want to be aware of the wind, colors, architecture, what people around me are doing, saying. I make up stories and dialogue. “I’m leaving you, finally, you creep!” There’s a lot of drama happening out there. Not murders, but small, nonetheless consequential interactions. I love big cities, the subway, and airports for this reason. Sometimes, if I’m in the middle of a writing project, I’m always rewriting a paragraph in my head. Searching for the right word, trying to make the right context and connection. *What’s this story all about?* Words are important to me. Their cadence, how they sound clumped together, so I’m repeating strings of them. Sometimes, speaking those words aloud to myself. I’m not being transported by the Grateful Dead, Stevie Nicks, or Van Morrison. No podcasts, either. *S-Town* can wait. I’m searching for an angle—an approach that’s new, different, often just plain *weird*. I’m always working. Looking for the next story or refining the one I’m working on. I’m working when I’m walking my dog, when I’m out with my wife, neighbor, colleague, friend. When I’m reading. When

I'm driving (maybe that's why I'm such a lousy driver.) Jeez, I'm working now, while I'm talking to you.

Dowling: I know you've described your work as a form of ethnography. As such, you have to observe people, of course. How do you get people to allow you to be that fly on the wall?

Bloom: A couple of tricks of the trade: I never interview someone who's standing up. I ask them to sit. I take them to a corner in a café, buy them a cup of coffee. I listen. If I'm interviewing someone on the street, I try to steer them to a bench. I'm tall, so I want to make sure our eyes are on the same level. They need to be as comfortable as I can possibly make them. I don't take out my reporter's notebook right away, and I hardly ever use a tape recorder.

Dowling: Why not?

Bloom: It gets in the way. It distracts the person I'm interviewing, and it distracts me. I get freaked that something will go wrong, that the device isn't working. I only use a tape recorder when I am worried that an interview may turn into something litigious. Someone after the fact saying they didn't say what they said. Maybe it's a sign of the times, but I find myself using a tape recorder more often these days than I did in the past. I don't like that. Generally, I stick an old-fashioned reporter's notebook in my back pocket. I don't know shorthand; I just write as fast as I can, but only the words, sentences, and phrases that strike me. I'm not a human recorder. That's not journalism. I love the rise-and-fall of back-and-forth conversation. I listen for it. Often, I don't take out my notebook until the interview's over and I've created a rapport. Sometimes, the first interview is a pre-interview. A time to get us both relaxed. Interviews can be intimate. You're often asking a stranger to share deeply personal information. I try to sit up straight. Show respect. It may sound minor and technical, but I never slouch. I'm truly interested in what people tell me and, towards that end, I want to telegraph that to whoever is talking. I sit at the edge of the seat. Descending into someone's life is confessional. I'm not a Catholic, but I think I understand the magic of what often takes place in a confessional booth between priest and parishioner. People want to unburden themselves. I'm a journalist, not a priest, and maybe because of that, there's less gravity that comes with me, there's no penance. Given the right space, people like to talk. Besides, hardly anyone these days asks anyone anything any longer, not even directions. If someone is asked a question these days, by the time they answer it, the person's got their face in their phone, scrolling TikTok. The art of conversation is dead.

Dowling: Are you concerned about slippage between what someone actually said and what you can remember later when you try to transcribe it? For example, how can you be sure that you're getting exact quotes? I say this

because, of course, Gay Talese used precisely this sort of method,¹¹ and it worked wonderfully for him and for similar reasons. He broke down the kind of barrier between reporter and subject that can be erected through holding a notebook or having a tape recorder, which puts people on edge and doesn't maybe let them open up. So, the question is, how can you be sure that you're getting those exact quotes?

Bloom: Talese is the inventor of “the art of hanging out”;¹² it's also what I try to do. One thing I've practiced is not asking too many questions or at least asking the right questions. Let the rapport work. It's not a confession for *me*. I try to limit what I say. I try to be succinct. Whenever I feel I'm asking too much, I shut up. Let the silence work. People are uncomfortable with it. Interviewing is the black box of reporting, its cornerstone. It's listening and observing. But doing it very well, taking it to a higher level. It's really an art, and as such, you have to practice it. I note whether the person appears nervous, makes eye contact with me, what they're wearing, what kind of shoes they've got on—whether they're tie, slip-ons, or boots—whether the person has their shirt buttoned to the top, whether he/she is swallowing hard, whether they're wearing jeans with holes in them, what brand they are, with or without a belt (thin or wide, leopard-skin or polka dot), whether the person has body odor, is wearing perfume, or smells like pig shit. Does she play with her hair? Does he shake his foot nervously? What do they do with their hands? There's a lot going on, and it's enervating work. I like meeting the baker, butcher, barista, barber, bartender. With city and rural people, I can get mesmerized with how they talk, how they make sense of their own worlds. I want to be there to appreciate the kind of native, found poetry that can flow from their mouths.

Dowling: How do you put people at ease? How do you make them comfortable, maybe, if they're not so willing to open up?

Bloom: I've got no problem sharing what people say to me after the fact. So, if someone is reticent to spill their story, I don't mind sharing the interview with that person later, before it goes into print. It takes the edge off the interview. It can be risky, people can recant, but I find that doesn't happen often. The person doing the talking has the final vetting authority. That's the way it ought to be. I'm also aware of the differential, the hierarchy between me, the Joan Didion-wannabe reporter, who's trying to get something out of someone that's to my advantage. So, I've got no problem in sharing what that person says to me and giving that person power over what they've said. It's not gotcha journalism. It's book writing. For *The Oxford Project*, a story of a community eighteen miles west of Iowa City, some people spoke grammatically incorrectly. That led to an important verisimilitude. I wanted residents to speak the way they speak among their friends, their family. I shared the

interviews; those interviewed got to see what they said before it got printed. And no one changed a word. How do I put people at ease? By being truly interested in and curious about their lives. I *am* interested. I *am* curious. I want to see if I can figure out what makes them tick, what motivates them, what's truly important in their lives. Ninety percent of what someone says to me never gets in the book, never gets in the final rendition. I'm trying to extract the grounds before I serve up the coffee.

Dowling: So, there's a lot on the cutting room floor, then, if ninety percent of that interview is not used. That raises the question, how do you organize your material, especially in light of documentary reporting that you're going to be pulling up, especially from historical archives, maybe secondary sources too?

Bloom: By creating a beginning, middle, and end. Every interview, every story, has an arc. Each starts with an arresting, knock-'em-dead opening, or lede, that begs readers to go on. Then the arc builds to a middle, where I try to accelerate the prose, perhaps with an anecdote, a boxcar that's so perplexing and curious that the reader has to stay engaged. You hook 'em with the beginning, but you make them yours with the middle. Then—Bam!—a killer ending. I never really change the chronology of what anyone says to me during the interview. That goes back to how to manage the interview, the oral give-and-take of information. In *The Oxford Project*, when I interviewed the local butcher—and I don't get to interview butchers every day—I got fascinated with the process of butchering a cow or a pig. Killing a live animal and then disassembling it into sellable parts and pieces. That's totally foreign to me. My only connection with cuts of meat is when I buy hotdogs or hamburgers at the local Hy-Vee. So, the interview started with, "What's it like butchering a pig? Whaddaya do?" Next, I wanted to go deeper than his occupation. What goes on in your head while you're performing what must be a rote process? I'm hoping to get a glimpse of what makes a difference to him. That might be specifics of his family, how his life has been affected by personal tragedy. We might segue into politics; that's always a way to get people going. So, there's an arc from profession to mental state to pivots in his life that have affected him, perhaps profoundly.

I try to create a complete story within the interview. All my reporting starts with preparation for the interview, followed by the interview. I never wing it. The work starts with researching everything about the person so that the first word of the interview begins a very pointed conversation. I'm trying to figure out how he or she imparts meaning to their life. There are lots of reporters who ask everything under the sun; they're like photographers snapping away hundreds of shots without much thinking. That's too automatic

for me. Too much a meaningless record of everything whizzing by. There's no meaning, no context. I'm more intentional. If I know who I'm interviewing, I always, without exception, write my questions out in advance. I really love doing that pre-interview reporting, then meeting the person and descending into who they are. Larry King, the ultimate pop-culture interviewer, never did that. He was proud of saying that he wanted to talk to people as though he were drinking a beer with them for the first time. I'm not like that. I come trying to know as much as I can about a person and seeking to go deeper.

Often, when I'm interviewing someone, my question to that person is, "Why do you say that? Why do you think that? Do you really believe that? Talk about that." I've already done the preliminary reporting: where the person grew up, what the person's job is, what she's said in the past about pretty much everything. I'm more interested in why. I like to stop during an interview and let the silence work for me and the person I'm with. Word documentarians have the advantage that they're not working with images or sound. We can allow for dead space. So, often I won't say anything for ten or twenty seconds. That can freak someone out. I don't mean it to. But it often allows them to go deeper. To become more introspective.

Dowling: In terms of depth—going beyond the interview process and into more of the documentary research—you've tackled some enormous projects, such as *The Audacity of Inez Burns*, which chronicles almost a century of San Francisco. How do you keep from being overwhelmed by how much information is out there?

Bloom: You have to know your story, want to know it better, and be fully committed to telling it in a longform linear format that is compelling and riveting. Full of twists and turns. The Inez Burns book is the story of nearly a century of a woman's life, but the larger story is the geography that surrounds Burns's kaleidoscopic life—San Francisco. You tell the story in bits and pieces, nuggets, as though they're scenes from a movie. You can't tell it all at once. It's an exciting process of holding back, pacing yourself, like running a marathon. If you start by thinking of finishing mile twenty-five, you're gonna get a side ache and drop out at mile twelve. To mix metaphors, dealing with such a complex, organic topic is engaging in a love affair. How she walks, talks, dresses? What would her reaction to that, to this, be? What'd she say when she was ambushed by crooked cops, cops she'd paid off plenty to? What could she have seen in that loser of a second husband of hers, the couch potato she eventually knocked off? That kind of curiosity and immersion propels you deeper into the personnel of the book, the dramatis personae. I suppose it's like novel writing, looking for motives, recreating dialogue (when the characters are all dead), trying to inhabit their minds. You're searching for

the marrow, the corpus. It's a long, drawn-out, intense affair—whether it's with Inez Burns; Riceville residents of *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes*; the locals of Oxford, Iowa; gumball-size pearls and the people who live for them; or Postville, the town twenty-five miles west of the Mississippi, where I camped out for five years. You lose yourself down a rabbit hole; it's all you care about. You'll do anything you can, ethically that is, to nurture that relationship. You'll go anywhere you need to get at understanding the 360-degree locus of it.

This isn't gotcha journalism. You're not parachuting into Riceville, Postville, Oxford, Rio de Janeiro, rural China, doing your interviews, confirming exactly what you expected, and then saying, "Thank you ma'am, I'm outta here!" You sit down and listen to people five, six, seven, eight, ten times. It's time-consuming. You want to find out how one person's actions might have affected someone else's, sometimes in an obvious way, other times in a kind of accidental, serendipitous way, that somehow changes the ethos of an entire community, so that maybe, just maybe, you'll be able to get at a version of something that might, just might, resemble the ultimate truth, that 360-look. It's not parachute journalism, the local 10 News: "That's the story, Joe! Now, back to the studio!" These sagas are complicated. They require deep, heavy, intellectual lifting. I'm always asking myself, *What's going on here?* What's really going on here? How can I begin to get at this 360-vantage point? What do the Hasidic Jews really feel? How do the born-and-bred locals really feel about the civil war happening in their backyard? What's going on in the mind of the power brokers, those whose pocketbooks are on the line? If you interview enough people and give them enough time, and you go back and forth, and you let their ideas germinate and sprout with them and with you, then you might be able to get at some very rough version of what's really going on in that *ecosystem* you've spent so much time trying to understand.

Dowling: Your version of the so-called truth, of course, is predicated on interviews along with documentary reporting and research that you've done in the back, too. You have real people, who may be well connected, very much alive, and may have access to attorneys, who may have money for very high-powered attorneys to defend themselves and/or launch some kind of an assault based on what you've done. How do you deal with representing them, given the potential for offending them and also, in terms of description of a place, not even a person, but a location or a geography or a region as a character that certain people may feel the need to defend? How do you deal with description in your nonfiction? Are you ever worried that the way you've described someone, or perhaps a region, will offend them, or when it's inferred as superficial or even catty judgment?

Bloom: I've never been sued. No one's ever thrown a punch at me. I've

never been coldcocked. Occasionally, when I'm about to interview someone, they'll pull out their own tape recorder. They want to have a record of what they're about to say. That's okay. I don't mind it. It's extraordinarily difficult to please everyone. That's not your job. If that's what you wanna do, go into PR, strategic communication, as it's called today. A journalist ought to offend. "Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable," as the fictional Chicago bartender, Mr. Dooley, used to say.¹³ Or, as George Orwell supposedly wrote, "Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations."¹⁴ I'm trying to get at something that people who have lived in a community their whole lives never have had the perspective to see. I hope to get a kind of insider-outsider perspective. It's gonna piss people off. Absolutely! I know that. But you don't go into journalism to make friends. You're trying to cast a shaft of light on—if you've done your work right—micro laboratories of the human condition. Those are the kinds of places and stories I try to pick.

In *Postville*, in this quest to get at "the 360," as I call it, in the morning, I hung out with the locals at Ginger's, the local coffee shop. After a while, I wasn't the crazy writer from the University of Iowa any longer. I had become just another guy, waking up, slurping coffee, and eating a very sweet pastry, developing a belly. In the afternoons, I'd go to the kosher slaughterhouse and hang out with the rabbis, the guys slitting the throats of the cattle for a living. After I had been doing this for a month or two, one of the rabbis lowered his voice and said to me, "Ve know where you are every morning, Shlomo—my Hebrew name; that's what they called me. Ve know you're vit the other side. What are they saying about us?" Well, that puts you in a strange, but terrifically sublime, position, because, at about the same time that was happening, the locals crosstown at Ginger's started in on me: "Hey, we know you go over to the slaughterhouse. What are those crazy rabbis saying about us?" It turned into an a-ha moment. I saw a lot of similarities that neither the rabbis nor the locals had likely ever realized. Minor stuff, I suppose, but really not so minor. No one ever took off their hats. The locals wore feed caps and would never think of taking them off, even inside. And in the slaughterhouse, the rabbis were also wearing hats—yarmulkes. So, you have two very different cultures thinking they are totally separate and apart, and they're wearing hats for the same reason. Both, because they're an homage to the almighty. The farmers are wearing hats because of the sun; the hats protect them. The rabbis are wearing them because of something else that they can't control—God's will or power. Like the weather. You never know what the next day or hour will bring. There were other uncanny similarities I picked up on: Whenever the farmers would crack a joke, they'd say, "*Uff da!*" Norwegian for something

like, “Oh, my God.” And then in the afternoon, the rabbis would be saying in Yiddish, “*Oy!*” meaning something close to the same thing.

I’m quite certain that neither side would ever have thought that there was anything similar about the other side. Case in point: It takes an insider-outsider moment like these to figure out that maybe these two diametrically opposed sets of people really aren’t all that different after all.

I stayed with a Lutheran farming family just outside of Postville during the reporting phase of the book. They were very open; they shared with me their sense of their community and how their lives were changing. In the book, I described Brenda, the mother and wife, as “a handsome, big-boned strong woman.”¹⁵ Boy, did I ever hear about that! After *Postville* came out, I did a reading in northeastern Iowa, not far from Postville—I don’t like readings, but that’s a different story—and right before the reading began, a queue of two hundred guys on Harleys zoomed into this town of Marquette. And the head dude got two inches from my nose and told me in no uncertain terms, “We didn’t like what you said about our friend. We want you to take that back. That wasn’t a very nice thing to say.” He looked at me, and I looked at him, and I think I blinked first. Driving home that day, I came to the conclusion that that guy might have had a good point. When you’re describing people, you can’t describe everything; it’s not an inventory. You’re not the FBI. I chose to describe Brenda as “big-boned” and “handsome.” But that description carried too much of my own cultural viscera. What the hell had I been thinking? She was a healthy, hardy human being, engaged in working the rich Iowa soil. So, in the paperback version of *Postville* I deleted the description. Four words. I don’t think the book rises or falls on those four words. What this posse of motorcycle dudes taught me was to be mindful of the power of the words you choose. They can comfort, but they can sting. In the later stages of my career, I’ve tried to come up with more meaningful ways to bring life to important characters—personages who I want to convey as real, 360-degree people to readers. I hope catty is for someone else.

Dowling: These descriptors may ring true at the moment—that this woman is “big-boned” and “handsome”—but is that necessary to bring out, or not, is the question, in terms of the narrative, the story you’re telling? And if it doesn’t necessarily drive that story or contribute to it in any way, like you say, in later editions, you were okay with leaving it out. How important is dialogue, *hearing*, not only seeing the importance of the whole person (the shoes, clothes, posture), but hearing the voice? Hearing them is connected to dialogue. How important is that power of observation you’re describing in terms of your ability to craft dialogue and in terms of the larger story arc you’re delivering? How important is it to have dialogue at all, or should nar-

rative journalism not necessarily carry it?

Bloom: The old journalism adage—show, don't tell—is why dialogue is so important. Dialogue can give us profound poetry. It can turn words into song. And it doesn't have to be English; I hear it in Spanish or Portuguese, two languages I'm conversant in. Dialogue is important for a couple of technical reasons, too. Dialogue takes on multiple paragraphs, and they're often short paragraphs. So, in the dialogue between me and someone else, or among me and two or three other people, each comment takes on its own paragraph, and these short paragraphs are easy to read on the printed page. Readers' eyes gravitate to white space, and you can get away with a lot of it using dialogue. It helps readers' eyes breathe. Dialogue also speeds the story. It gives readers a sense of being right there, in Ginger's or the slaughterhouse. Another reason I try to gird my narrative writing with as much dialogue as possible: I love the way people talk. I love the way people try to make meaning out of their lives in their own words. I don't want to do it for them; I want them to do it for themselves. As long as it speeds the narrative, I think dialogue is essential to great storytelling.

For *The Oxford Project*, I interviewed a woman named Pat Henkelman, who said to me out of the blue, "There used to be a hat store in town. I wish it still was here. I love hats."¹⁶ Listen to that. It's gorgeous. Pat looked to me like the kind of woman who in the 1950s wouldn't think of going anywhere without a pretty hat on her head.

Preceding her reverie of hats, Pat also shared with me meeting the man who would become her husband:

"In 1940, Harry and I were working at a bee factory in Harlan, and when I came back from lunch one day, he was filling my jars. That night we met at the county fair and had our picture taken, and that was that."¹⁷

That gives me goosebumps!

But listen to what she said next:

"After forty-five years of marriage, he left me for another woman. I didn't know who the woman was, but everyone else in town did. I would have felt better if she was young and beautiful, but she wasn't. They used to play euchre at the Legion Hall."¹⁸

Gorgeous, luscious stuff!

It comes right from Pat's gut. So, dialogue is key. And, again, the only way to get it is to shut the hell up. If you've created the right environment, listen and let the magic come out. You'll find it, you'll hear it; just have to wait for it.

Dowling: So dialogue seems like something you have to pick up by tuning your ear to it properly to be able to pick up the nuances of an idiom or a

dialect of not only a people and a community but what makes an individual idiosyncratic and unique; capturing that is key. Animating them and placing them as characters within a larger scene is another part of the craft that you have mastered in your works. How do you pull together the disparate elements of dialogue and documentary evidence to make scenes cohere?

Bloom: You listen, but you also need to develop a sense of drama and timing. Two anecdotes: I'm in rural China interviewing pearl farmers. This is very rural China. These guys have never heard a word of English, and I speak no Mandarin. They throw a fishing net out, and they're bringing in hundreds of oysters. Forty farmers—and they pry open the oysters, and there's a treasure trove of luminescent, multicolored pearls shimmering right before my eyes, right from the live oysters. It's pretty amazing, and my first reaction is "Wow!" And they respond by repeating, "Wow!" "Wow!" "Wow!" In writing that scene, I wanted to make clear that after I shouted "Wow!" the farmers increased the volume of their "Wow!" each time in a kind of chorus. So, I increased the point size of W-O-W in the three iterations in the text of *Tears of Mermaids*, from twelve to sixteen to twenty point, which I'm sure played havoc with the page designer. The Chinese farmers might not know anything else in English, but "Wow!"¹⁹ worked in their language, too. This's interesting shit! Not to share it with the reader would be a crime.

Another anecdote from that book: I did an interview with a pearl sorter, who'd never been more than fifty miles from her home. The concept of America, Europe, even Beijing or Shanghai, was nonexistent to her. I remember asking this diffident woman, through an interpreter, "What do you dream of doing someday?" I used the word "dream" as a synonym for aspire. Shame on me! What a middle-class, bourgeois, ridiculous question! She answered sort of quizzically, "Some nights I have dreams, and other nights, I don't."²⁰ She took the question literally. Her aspirations were to be as happy as possible. What more was there? So I used this exchange as a riff in the book. It allowed me to confront my own geocentric notions, but it also brought these personages on this massive global assembly line to life.

Right now, I'm reading a book that, somehow, I neglected, called *Coyotes*, by Ted Conover.²¹ Totally immersive journalism. He joins Mexicans and Central Americans in crossing the border. It's a deep dive in sociology and, among other issues, deals with stereotypes not just that Americans hold but also the stereotypes Hispanics share. Americans, Europeans, First World people, are one current in a wide river of humanity, and because of economic and historic imperatives, we're in the middle of that teeming river. But if we're going to be universal and effective storytellers, we need to realize there are lots of other currents, eddies, whirlpools, maybe some undertow, in that river and we need

to try to tell those stories, too.

Dowling: Is there a common thread between those kinds of stories that move you and the ones that you seek out to produce yourself? If so, you mentioned Ted Conover. Are there other sources of inspiration among narrative journalists?

Bloom: I don't give a flying fuck about Washington. I don't give a shit about traditional politics. The apogee for journalists from my era was to land in Washington, D.C., and cover the halls of power. I am not the go-to guy for that. I don't care much for interviewing "important" people. I look at reporters like Studs Terkel, Michael Herr, J. Anthony Lukas, as role models—those interested in interviewing working-class Jacks and Jills, not the Ivankas and Jareds of the world.

Dowling: I'm thinking also of Ernie Pyle.

Bloom: Absolutely! The preeminent World War II correspondent for Scripps-Howard who wrote about G. I. Joe.²² There's always been a plethora of institutional, top-down journalism, and it serves its purpose. What the president says is news. But can I stand to watch CNN for more than fifteen minutes? Can I stand to read much of the top-down establishment journalism epitomized by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Wall Street Journal*? It's "agenda journalism." There's nothing very surprising about most of it. I'm more interested in those rural pearl farmers shouting, "Wow!" or Pat wishing there was a hat store in town. I'm more interested in the Ernie Pyle grunts. Gay Talese is a fascinating writer. The ability of Hunter S. Thompson to poke fun at politicians is an amazing read. I adore Tom Wolfe for his skill to ramble on and on and make me want to go along for the ride while also creating neologisms—or new words. But that's not what I do, which is to park myself with someone who's got a story, metaphorically take a puff on a cigarette, sit, and wait. In doing so, tell a larger story.

As a little boy, I used to go to bed with a transistor radio glued to my ear, and I'd listen to a great storyteller in New York City on WOR Radio, 710 on the AM dial. His name was Jean Shepherd. His most famous book was *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*.²³ He's probably best known for a movie he narrated, *A Christmas Story*.²⁴ Shep used to spin stories about his boyhood friends, Flick, Schwartz, and his Uncle Al. His stories were an attempt at making sense out of his small, elaborate, proscribed world. That's really what journalists ought to be doing. It's not easy. I think that when rocket scientists or brain surgeons are really stumped, one might say to the other, "Well, it can't be that difficult to figure out; I mean, it's not journalism." To do it well, journalism is a very complicated job.

So, I come from this heritage of oral storytellers. I got some of it from

listening to itinerant shoe salesman—“shoe dogs”—who used to work in my father’s family shoe store in northern New Jersey. These guys, they could tell a story! About broads, gams that went forever, poor schmucks, schlemiels, racetrack touts.

Look, the oldest ask in the world is, “Tell me a story.” When the cave dude left the cave and said, “Mom’s gonna take care of you, I’ll be back; it might be two weeks, it might be three months, but I’ll be back.” So, when the cave dude comes back, dragging a side of beef, the first thing the cave kids and the cave spouse ask is, “What was it like out there?” “Whaddaya see?” That’s our job as storytellers. To tell what we saw, to tell everyone what it’s like out there.

In doing that, you’re gonna piss people off. Some of them aren’t going to like what you made of what you saw. “It was really swampland over there,” the cave dude says. “Not nearly as nice as where we live! And the people over there, they’re real creeps!” You aspire to get at some degree of truth-telling. Not catty, but based on your own impressions and on facts. It’s going to offend a lot of people. They’re going to malign you, and they can do that really well today with social media. People are going to cast horrible aspersions, not just on you, but on your family, maybe on your race, religion, your gender. They might go after your job, pressure your boss to fire you. But that’s only if you’re doing great journalism. You’re out there to tell the world what it’s like outside the cave. And in many cases, that cave is America.

Dowling: Which leads me to suggest there is a kind of narrative journalism that will serve democracy. That boldness you’re speaking to is something I’ve personally admired in your own work, particularly its willingness to speak to the truth of a local community, for example, that may be offensive to some people, but to be able to do so in part because you don’t belong to that community. Coming from the East Coast as a Jew, as a liberal—anti-gun, pro-choice—you often write about rural subjects; you often write about middle America. This entails going out of your comfort zone and becoming that Holden Caulfield who is not in the stadium but on the hill outside of the stadium so that he can see with his own eyes what the people in the stadium are doing at the opening of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as our narrator.²⁵ It’s that outsider’s perspective—I enjoyed that privilege by having never been in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop as a student or as a faculty member, yet forging the last several decades of my career cheek to jowl next to it. Talk about that positionality, that sense of perspective—necessary for the best type of journalism—that liminality, not inside but a little bit to the outside. Thoughts on that?

Bloom: You need a support system if you’re going to do this kind of

journalism. I'm not a believer in much. I'm a cynic. I don't have many answers and I don't trust anyone who says they do. But I do have a fascination with believers, whether they're Trumpers, anti-abortion zealots, UFO freaks, die-hard Hawkeye fans.²⁶ I did a story about the Sisters of Charity, hanging out with nuns who completely revere Mother Teresa. I did a story about monks in a Texas monastery, who were former addicts, misfits, men gone astray, as well as some average Joes who would have turned into Richard Cory if it weren't for the church. I have a genuine fascination with believers. Journalism allows me to try to figure out how the other half lives. Maybe it's more than just a half. I like being the outsider figuring why everyone's inside.

After I graduated from Berkeley in the early 1970s, I tried to be a writer, but I also needed a *real* job. So, I started working for Del Monte along the assembly line in a cannery in Emeryville, California. I was a depalletizer, which meant that every sixty seconds, I'd push a button that would lower 144 cans of fruit cocktail on and off a wooden pallet. The first thing the guy I worked with asked me was, "What you got to get stoned on?" And I answered, "This looks easy!" The guy sneered at me for the next week. When I went to the breakroom, guys were smoking joints, sipping cheap whisky, sleeping. These guys weren't thinking about how they were going to save up enough money to send their kids to college. They weren't thinking of saving enough money to buy a used, black-and-white TV. Most were likely thinking: How do I get through this fucking shift to get to another fucking shift, to get to another. So, I wrote about the malaise I saw and sent it off to the *New York Times* op-ed pages. This was my first piece in a major publication.²⁷ For me, it was the equivalent of another idol, Frank Conroy and *Stop-Time*, his first book, ringing alarms everywhere.²⁸ For me, it was the jackpot. I had written that the work was so horrendous that the only way to stay with it was to get ripped. The story started me on a career of the insider-outsider telling their stories.

Dowling: Moving into your current situation and the business of writing today, you've said that you don't like being regarded as an academic even though you're a professor. How do you conceive of yourself professionally and why does that matter for your writing?

Bloom: Recently, I had a discussion with an academic colleague, who asked about the new book I'm working on. He wanted to know how my "fieldwork" was going. It sort of cracked me up. Field work? Like Caesar Chavez and the UFW? What you really mean is interviewing, researching, reading articles and books, doing more interviews, filing FOIAs, getting stonewalled, hung-up on, ignored, and then pounding the pavement for more? That's basic reporting.

As much as I can love any institution, I love the University of Iowa be-

cause it's given me time to do what I like to do—maybe what I need to do. Reporting and writing is in my bones, in my corpuscles. It's nearly impossible to do the kind of book writing I do as a lone wolf. It's harder today than it ever was. You're constantly writing grant applications, pitches to editors and agents, waiting for callbacks that never come. You're having to consider mollifying your stuff to make it palatable to the establishment New York publishing world, as well as to Hollywood, which, these days, is more issue-averse than ever. With just a bachelor's degree, I'm probably the most undereducated, tenured, full professor in America today.

But there's a place for writers like me in the academy, and there ought to be more. I'm certainly not the go-to guy when it comes to the German press, 1880–1888. I'm not the go-to guy for contextualizing McLuhanesque messages. I don't know anything about that. But what I do know is narrative nonfiction writing, because that's what I do every day.

When I started at the University of Iowa, some colleagues advised me to get involved with an organization called AEJMC,²⁹ sort of the flagship association for professors in journalism. Like Groucho Marx, I'm not a joiner. But I figured what the hell, so I arranged for a talk that would be given at the annual convention, held that year in Washington, D.C., by a journalist I deeply admired, Hugh Sidey, now deceased, who was a major force in American journalism. He'd been the White House, longtime columnist for *Life* magazine, as well as bureau chief for *Time*.³⁰ He was someone I tried to model my professional life after, even though I never sought a Washington nexus. He was a master, a wonderful writer, very much like Teddy White, *The Making of The President, 1964, '68, '72*.³¹ Sidey was an amazing reporter; in a sense like Hunter Thompson not on acid, like Joe McGinniss in *The Selling of the President 1968*.³² So, I created a panel at AEJMC with Sidey, one of the titans of our profession. I made contact with Sidey, who was born in Greenfield, Iowa. That was my connection; his brother ran the weekly newspaper back home in Greenfield. As young men, Sidey and his brother, Ed, flipped a coin. The winner would stay in Iowa and run the family newspaper; the loser would go to Washington and see what he could find. The “loser” in this case became one of the most important journalists of our epoch. I thought Sidey would fill the room to the rafters. He'd be speaking to *journalism* professors. Well, guess what? Four people showed up. And three of them were friends, and one was my wife. We had a venue of 500 seats at the Sheraton-Shoreham Hotel, and four people showed up. I privilege, honor, worship journalists. That was the last AEJMC convention I ever attended. The truth is—believe it or not—there are journalism academics who don't much like journalists and journalism.

Dowling: I was hoping we could end with your reflections on how the role of editor has changed. Perhaps connect that to any regrets and highlights of your biggest journalistic moments, or maybe your magnum opus, the thing you hope to be remembered for, and how your work fits into the canon of American journalism. The reason I ask about regrets relates to Tracy Kidder buying back the rights to *The Road to Yuba City*, on the Juan Corona murders, after his realization that it was too sensational.³³ He was humiliated by its presence. Do you have a book like this in your corpus? Which book is your crown jewel? How have editors factored in?

Bloom: The role of editors has changed dramatically. When *Postville* came out, I worked with an editor at Harcourt by the name of Walter Bode. Walter actually read the manuscript word for word. He used a blue pencil and marked up the manuscript like Maxwell Perkins.³⁴ That doesn't exist today. Frankly, I'm not sure if editors really even read manuscripts any longer. Certainly, they don't pore over them. Editors today are acquiring editors. They're not wordsmiths, they're business people. This is what happens in a production-centric, we-need-to-grow-eight-percent-each-year economy. They're interested in marketable ideas—yes, and that's wonderful—but once they've found the latest idea widget, they're on to another. The role of editor has receded. If Walter Bode changed a word in my manuscript, he'd type several paragraphs, *suggesting* that I *consider* not using that word for the following reasons. Contrast that to a later book of mine. When the manuscript came back to me, the editor told me, "Wouldn't change a word. Reads like the wind." *What?* I wanted the editor to say, "We need to do some work! We need to sharpen this! It's way too long! We need to make it punchier. We need to make this better!" Today, you're on your own, so you hire someone to do what was once the publishing-house editor's job.

You have to look at your books and articles as babies who grow up with lives of their own. You're proud of them for a whole bunch of reasons. They came out at different times in your career. If you're lucky and you really love the craft, and you have a university job or some family money or are lucky enough to juggle two separate incomes, then you can continue writing, although book publishing is getting more and more difficult because fewer people are hooked on book reading. All your books are different for lots of reasons, mostly because you've changed, because you'd gotten smarter—or at least less dumb. I love some of the stuff in *Postville*. I love that episode in *The Audacity of Inez Burns* when the chisel-chinned cop is looking at the safe and has a gun to Inez's head and is screaming, "Unlock that safe and do it now!"³⁵ When someone asked Frank Lloyd Wright which one of his buildings was his favorite, he supposedly said, *My next one*. Right now, I'm excited about

making sense out of a whacky merry-prankster newspaper I worked for in Rio de Janeiro to start my career off in the 1970s, where Hunter Thompson worked a decade before I arrived.³⁶ That's happiness. To be able to say, I've got an 80,000-word blank sheet of paper in the carriage of my typewriter that I'm looking forward to filling. If I can bring a couple of readers along for the ride, that's even better.

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Notes

- ¹ Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature, “Lit Walk.”
- ² Sullivan, “Iowa City’s Literary Walk,” May 18, 2011.
- ³ Bloom, *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes*; Thornberry, “Unyielding Soil,” January 17, 2022; Bloom, *The Audacity of Inez Burns*; Veltman, “Inez Burns’ Abortion Clinic,” April 22, 2018.
- ⁴ Bloom, *Tears of Mermaids*; Feldstein and Bloom, *The Oxford Project*; Bloom, *Inside the Writer’s Mind*; Bloom, *Postville*. See “The Recommended Stephen G. Bloom,” 192.
- ⁵ Kent, “SPJ Selects Stephen Bloom,” August 13, 2020.
- ⁶ Kevin, *The Footloose American*, 349–50.
- ⁷ Weingarten, *The Gang that Wouldn’t Write Straight*.
- ⁸ Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*.
- ⁹ Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” 246.
- ¹⁰ Bangs et al., “Let It Bleed,” *Rolling Stone*, January 21, 1970, 14ff.
- ¹¹ Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*, 30.
- ¹² Lounsbury, “Gay Talese and the Fine Art of Hanging Out,” 123; Wheelwright, “The Orgy Next Door,” 29–50.
- ¹³ The original reads, “. . . comforts th’ afflicted, afflicts th’ comfortable, . . .” Dunne, “Mr. Dooley on Newspaper Publicity,” *San Diego (CA) Union*, October 5, 1902, 8.
- ¹⁴ The source of this quote is disputed. For a summary of attributions, go to Quote Investigator, “The News Is What Somebody Does Not Want You to Print. All the Rest Is Advertising.”
- ¹⁵ Bloom, *Postville*, 102.
- ¹⁶ Feldstein and Bloom, *The Oxford Project*, 228.
- ¹⁷ Feldstein and Bloom, 228.
- ¹⁸ Feldstein and Bloom, 228.
- ¹⁹ Bloom, *Tears of Mermaids*.
- ²⁰ Bloom, *Tears of Mermaids*, 159. Text quotes are paraphrased from the original.
- ²¹ Conover, *Coyotes*, 1987.
- ²² Pyle, *Here Is Your War: Story of G.I. Joe*.
- ²³ Shepherd, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*.
- ²⁴ Clark, *The Christmas Story*, with screenplay co-authored by Shepherd.
- ²⁵ Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, 4–6.
- ²⁶ “Hawkeyes” is the name of the football team of the U.S. University of Iowa, in Iowa City, Iowa.
- ²⁷ Bloom, “A Cannery Connection,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1973, 47.
- ²⁸ Conroy, *Stop-Time*.
- ²⁹ The AEJMC is the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, with headquarters in Columbia, South Carolina.
- ³⁰ Sidey, *Hugh Sidey’s Profiles of the Presidents*; Porter, “Remembering Hugh Sidey (1927–2005)”; Martin, “Hugh Sidey, Who Covered the Presidency for Time,

Dies at 78.”

³¹ White, *The Making of The President, 1964*; White, *The Making of The President, 1968*; White, *The Making of The President, 1972*.

³² McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968*.

³³ Kidder, *The Road to Yuba City: A Journey into the Juan Corona Murders*; Dowling, “Beyond the Program Era,” 59–60.

³⁴ Berg, *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*.

³⁵ Bloom, *The Audacity of Inez Burns*, 207–8, paraphrased.

³⁶ Kevin, *The Footloose American*. Bloom’s manuscript in progress is tentatively titled, *A Lost Generation in Brazil*.

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