Suggestions for Daily Journalists

By Gay Talese

I am a man who has never had a happier time in my life than when I was a reporter in The New York Times news room. I left The New York Times with a tear in my eye -- more than a tear. I was 32 years old. I had been at the Times since I started at 22 and I left not because of any disenchantment with the paper, but rather because the limitations of daily journalism -- space particularly and the time that one could devote to the indulgence of one's curiosity -- made it somewhat frustrating to stay on a daily newspaper. I wanted to spend more time with people who were not necessarily newsworthy. I believed then -- and I believe now even more than then -- that the role of the nonfiction writer should be more with private people, insignificant people perhaps, but people whose lives represent a larger significance than their own lives.

The fiction writer, playwright, and novelist deal with private life. They deal with ordinary people and elevate these people into our consciousness and give them names and give them a place in life because of the power of the writer, the power of the word. The world of the nonfiction writer, the writer of biography, primarily has dealt with people in public life, names that are known to us. But the private life that I wanted to delve into as a young writer for The New York Times was the life of the person who would not be worthy of news coverage. I thought that if we could bring these people into the larger consciousness, they could help us understand the trends in all the lives around us.

My father was a tailor; my uncles were tailors. I believe a man who is a tailor or who is a doorman at a fine hotel gets the sense of the flow of life. It is a time in which a man who has a gift of observing can understand people. The men who entered my father's tailor shop -- who could afford a fine suit and there weren't many of them -- brought into that shop a sense of who they were, and my father was the man who measured them, who had a kind of relationship with them, who could understand a great deal about lives more broad than his own. He had come from a small village in southern Italy, but he was very fine with a needle and thread. He wanted to bring to the suits he made a sense of his own style. He had a great sense of caring about a perfect buttonhole, of measuring perfectly, of making a suit that would fit on the body and would elevate the presence. He was an artist with a needle and thread and he didn't care if he would make a lot of money. Each suit was a work of art in his definition. And he was an observer.

We are the people of the underclass -- people who went out and observed and were not observed. My father was an eavesdropping tailor. He knew a lot about the people who came into his shop. I grew up hearing about the lives of people, ordinary people, and I thought they were interesting. One of the people that I heard about was a man named Garet Garrett, a funny name. He was an editorial writer for The New York Times. He worked directly with the great Adolph Ochs, the patriarch of The New York Times,

whose family is still in control of the newspaper. In his retirement, Mr. Garrett would come to the Jersey shore and go to my father's shop to be measured. I was 14 and in high school. I would eavesdrop on what Mr. Garrett was telling my father. My father learned the English language by reading the New York Times -- particularly during World War II when my father's relatives back in Italy were all on the wrong side of the war. My father's brothers were fighting with Mussolini's army against the invading Allies in 1943. So I grew up with my father reading the Times with a certain sense of concern, being the only immigrant in the family and having his brothers shooting at the Americans and Canadians who were coming into Italy after the invasion of North Africa.

My father was trying to be patriotic, which he was on the surface, but in the evening after the door was closed and he'd turn on the shortwave radio, he would listen to the war news from Europe, particularly from Southern Italy. I was seeing in this little house of mine how major events affected us. Each day The New York Times had maps and arrows showing the armies getting closer and closer to my father's village and I could see a great sense of drama.

This is nonfiction; this is me. I was a kid going to Ocean City High School in New Jersey. I could hear Mr. Ochs referred to again and again by Mr. Garrett as Mr. Garrett was on a pedestal getting measured. My father would stitch and stitch and stitch all night making the perfect suit for what he thought was the perfect man. And I thought: I'm going to write my term paper on Mr. Ochs as he was described by Mr. Garrett. I started writing about Mr. Ochs for my English class. I got a B minus. I was very disappointed and so was my father.

About twenty-some years later, when I left The New York Times in 1965, the first thing I did was go back to the paper and write about some of those wonderful people, those characters who were in the city room and who were not news. The first person I wrote about was an obituary writer. He would wander about the city room with a little green cap, smoking a pipe in the days when you could smoke pipes. He would be thinking about death. He would be thinking about people who were about to die because he would interview them and tell them that he was going to updated the files on these people, a sort of advance obituary. He made his living in this very distinguished way. The first thing I did when I went to Esquire from the Times was to write about Mr. Bad News, I called him. What was it like to be a man who interviewed people whose time on earth was worthy of space in the New York Times when they died?

Then I wrote about Clifton Daniel at the Times and about Harrison Salisbury, a great correspondent. I was seeing journalism as a great story, as being worthy of reporting. I wanted to move the realm of curiosity into the lives of people who were being ignored because they had something to say and their lives had something to represent, so I wrote about these people for Esquire. What I brought to that magazine was the fulfillment of my own desire to write about people who were generally ignored. A lot of this became my book, The Kingdom and the Power. But it all came from my being at The New York Times and seeing these people that were interesting and were not written about. The

average city room character had not been written about, and it abounds in The Kingdom and the Power.

It all comes out of the tailoring background. As inquiring people, as curious people, we all bring parts of our ancestral experience to the way we see America, the way we see America represented.

I have a continuing quality of curiosity. I am 69 years old and I have as much of that curiosity as when I was 22. Curiosity is not something that we are going to get from the Columbia School of Journalism or the University of Missouri or anywhere else. Curiosity comes from within us.

I will give you an example from the book on which I am now working. You let the story live and you let the characters live their lives. That's what I do in nonfiction: indulge my curiosity. I am interested in private lives, nonfiction as a creative form. Creative -- not falsified -- not making up names, using real names, not composite characters, no taking liberties with factual information, but getting to know your characters through research, trust, building relationships. You know them so well they are like part of your private life. I have a feeling of respect for these people, even though I have written about gangsters or pornographers in books like "Thy Neighbor's Wife." But I saw the world as they see it. So curiosity is the beginning, seeing it as the son of a tailor. The diversity of a great newspaper allows for this kind of varied look at the larger world from writers who come from backgrounds as dissimilar as mine, people who have not had bookshelves in their homes, who have not gone to college.

I find a way to write with respect, a way to write the truth that is not insulting. That is where precise writing allows you to do things in telling the truth that that sloppy writing will not allow you to do. I get this care for the language from reading the great fiction writers: F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O' Hara, Irwin Shaw, fine short story writers. They would write about girls in their summer dresses, the football player and his relationship with a woman. Carson McCullers wrote a little piece in The New Yorker about a jockey who wants to eat more than he can. She described in her short story, "The Jockey," how each time this man eats a lamb chop he seems to see its formation on the side of his ribs.

When I was a sports writer, I wanted that kind of detail. I couldn't make it up, but I wanted that kind if detail. Fiction writers were my idols, but I wanted to bring that sense of reality to my nonfiction. Even when I was a daily journalist, I wanted to write the news through people, I wanted to write about people. When I covered a fire, the people were talking across the tenements. There was a kind of unity to the neighborhood. It wasn't a major fire, but I wrote about the fire through the dialogue, the firemen, the dog barking, the hoses all over the street, and the blocked traffic. It was a scene. This two-bell fire became a feature story.

In 1999, I had spent eight years unable to finish a book that I am now finishing. I wanted to get to my own story, but I didn't know how to get into it. I wanted to write about John Wayne Bobbitt, the guy who lost his penis. He got no sympathy from anybody and his wife was now being treated as a virtuous woman because he got what

he deserved. This was interesting. So I got to know John Bobbitt and hung around with him for six months. I drove him around, got too know him, got to know his doctor, and eventually got to know his wife. I traced the knife to Ikea where she had bought it three years before. I got the woman who sold the knife. Later on I became interested in urology and in 1995 I went to a convention in Las Vegas where there were 11,000 urologists, and one of them, of course, was the guy who put back the penis. I also got John Bobbitt to come to that convention because I found that urologists are mostly men. In fact, there was only one female urologist in New York.

I cultivated her.

"Are you going to the convention?" I asked her. "I want you to meet John Bobbitt."

"Oh, I'd like to meet John Bobbitt," she said. "I don't think his penis will ever work again."

"He told me it would work," I said. This was three years after severance. "If I can introduce you to him, could you see if you could get it to work?"

We went to this hotel where we were all staying. John Bobbitt did agree to come over. The lady doctor put some pornography on the hotel television set to try to get him sufficiently tumescent. And I had the scene. It was a wonderful scene. This is crazy, but I was looking for interesting situations. Getting a lady doctor and John Bobbitt in the same room was one of them.

After that I got involved with a restaurant owner at 206 E. 63rd St., a location where every restaurant failed, because I am interested in failure. Failure is a learning experience. When I was a sports writer, the locker room of a loser was always more interesting than the locker room of a winner. So here was John Bobbitt, who was a loser in every sense, losing his most important member; for five hours it was on the grass. From 1992 until 1999 I had invested eight years of my life on three subjects: the restaurant that was always failing and the history of its building, a redneck sheriff from Selma from my days in the civil rights movement, and the John Bobbitt story. I added my own life coming into the New York Times, but the organizational problems were enormous. The choreography of nonfiction if it is sprawling presents major control problems. You have to get all the steps, all the dancers in accord, if the book is going to hold up. And I had been eight years working, floundering, getting nowhere.

But in July of 1999, a Saturday, I happened to be watching a baseball game on the television between the Yankees and the Mets. I had been a Yankee fan all my life because during World War I the Yankees trained near Ocean City because of gas rationing, so I got hooked on baseball as an 11-year-old and remain hooked from then until now. Anyway, I was watching baseball, and on that same Saturday was a highly advertised game between the United States national women's soccer team and the national team of China. I was channel surfing, and I was interested in this soccer game because I had seen a number of Gatorade commercials involving Mia Hamm, who was doing the commercials with Michael Jordan and was beating him at everything. I had

never heard of her, but Mia Hamm was said to be the greatest soccer player in the United States, not only among women but among men. So when I saw the United States soccer match led by Mia Hamm, I started flipping between the baseball game and the soccer game, trying to avoid work, so I could get my mind off of the miserable life that I was living.

I had never watched soccer in my life; like people of my age, I don't understand soccer. It's a foreign game. My father might have understood it, but for all of the wonderful things that were imported from the old country, they did not import soccer. And here I am watching this game, and I'm not being very enthralled by it because I don't understand it. But I do know that there are 90,000 people in the Rose Bowl watching it. They were enthusiastic. I don't know what they were making all the noise about, but they were clearly excited. I was interested because of the adversarial relationship between the United States and China. That relationship brought a kind of Cold War element to the game as great sports events sometimes do, as a Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling fight did years ago in the period of Nazi Germany.

So I saw this game as interesting on that level. These women from the People's Republic of China are athletes and they are against the United States and Mia Hamm. It wound up being a nothing-nothing game. But after the extra time they had a shootout of penalty kicks. One Chinese woman ended up missing the penalty kick, and the game was over. If I were a sportswriter I would be in that locker room right now, and I wouldn't be talking to Mia Hamm -- I would be talking to that woman who missed the kick. She has to get on that airplane in Los Angeles and go all the way back to China somewhere, twenty-some hours in the air, and she has to live with that. She has to go back to a China that is so eager to knock off the Americans, so angry at our meddlesome foreign policy. It struck me that this was the way to write about China. This woman is 25 years old and she lost; she screwed up. What is it like for a 25-year-old woman to screw up in this communist regime emerging as a world power with a certain sense of an adversarial relationship with the U.S.?

I thought: "Oh, the New York Times will have that tomorrow." But there was nothing in the paper about this woman who had missed the kick. That week both Newsweek and Time had cover stories. This was the Women's World Cup. It was a big thing. But there was nothing about what I wanted to know. It was all about the American victory, and something about the Chinese and how they missed the kick, but nothing about that woman -- number 13, missed the kick, little red uniform, didn't know how to shoot straight and missed it.

So at my age I have met a lot of people who are powerful in journalism and I know a big honcho at Time-Warner, Time, Sports Illustrated, Fortune, all that. So I called him.

"Norman," I said. "In the article today there was nothing about the Chinese woman." So I sent him a fax and I told him what I thought would be a good story.

I said, "If you write about this woman, she will tell you something about how the Chinese react to this woman, what the neighborhood said about her, what her mother

had to deal with. This Women"s World Cup was on television around the world. She is suddenly being watched by the world, and she misses. How do they deal with defeat? We are talking about women who are part of the great achievement of China's being a world power, and she is therefore part of this. She is young, and she's probably had a great-great grandmother who had bound feet. And now she is using soccer to represent the new China, but she misses the damn ball, and she now represents disappointment."

This woman is an insignificant non-story because it wasn't in The New York Times; it wasn't in Newsweek. But I thought she could be a real key to representing the story of China. And I told him that I would be glad to do that story.

They called me up, thanked me for my idea, and told me to keep sending ideas in the future because I have good ideas. But nothing happened. Nothing happened. So the summer passes, and I am not getting anywhere. I was celebrating my 40th anniversary with my wife in Frankfurt. And I decided I was not going back to New York at the end of the week. I went to the airport and changed my ticket and went to Hong Kong. I went to get a ticket into Beijing, speaking not a word, knowing nobody. I checked into a good hotel because surely someone would speak English at the hotel. I asked the concierge. This is not like calling the public relations department of the New York Yankees for an interview with Derek Jeter. You can get that tomorrow. But here I am, over there, wanting to talk to someone who had missed a kick. It was not something to be very proud of.

It took me five months. I stayed in China five months looking for her. And you have to be pretty damn curious to stay in China for five months. But finally after five months I got to meet her. And I kept seeing her again and again through interpreters. I got to see her on the field, meet her teammates. I got to know them. Soon I had put a year in it. I got permission from the coach to go with them when they went to games. One of the places they went to was Taiwan. In the year 2000, the Chinese mainland team went to Taiwan and I went with them. I wasn't on the team bus, but I was following them, and I was able to hang around. What I am talking around is the art of hanging around. This is the type of nonfiction that I indulge in, hanging around people. You don't necessarily interview them, but you become part of the atmosphere. That is what I gradually did, even in China.

I have been on that story for two years. And now, not only has that story come together, but all that other stuff -- John Wayne Bobbitt, the restaurant that doesn't work, the redneck sheriff in post-Selma, all that -- is now the story of me trying to deal with reality, with all its misadventures, its wrong turns, but with an ever-energized quest to know something about the people who tend to be ignored. This has been my lifelong experience from the time I was a kid on the New York Times until now when I stand before you battered and aged -- well-tailored, but battered and aged.

I am the same guy, the same guy who is interested in all those people. So the little girl who missed the kick is a featured figure in this book that I am doing; the redneck sheriff is a featured figure; the guy who couldn't get his act together in a restaurant is a featured figure, and Loraine and John Bobbitt also make more than one appearance. Mr. Garrett

is in there, as is the trip to Alabama, my own odyssey into the deep South -- like my father's before me from Calabria in Southern Italy to America.

It's the continuation of American assimilation, the lasting change of America, and the growth of American education to the point where the journalism is far superior to what it once was. This is my life as a journalist, the son of a tailor who is curious about everyday people. It is all there in the book that I am writing.

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