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21 questions for Short Story Day Africa

by Andie Miller on Jun 15th, 2013 [Tweet](#) [Like 6](#)

On 21 June we celebrate [Short Story Day Africa](#), and in its honour we answer 21 questions.

1. Do you actually enjoy writing, or do you write because you like the finished product?

I only write when I have something burning to say. But when I'm feeling particularly preoccupied with something, there is nothing better to me than writing about it. Sitting down is hard, but when my butt is firmly planted on the chair and things start falling into place, I do love it.

2. What are you reading right now? And are you enjoying it? (No cheating and saying something that makes you sound like the intelligensia).

Killing for Profit, by Julian Rademeyer. It's a gruesome piece of investigative journalism about rhino poaching, but extremely well-written and researched, so it's pulling me along. The supply side I understand, but I'm trying to understand the demand, so I'm hoping it starts to shed some light on that.

3. Have you ever killed off a character and regretted it?

No, I'm very glad to be able to say, since I write mostly non-fiction.

4. If you could have any of your characters over for dinner, which would it be and why?

I was at a book launch the other day of a new book by explorer Patricia Glyn. She appears in my book *Slow Motion*, a collection of stories about walking, where she talks about her walk from Durban to Victoria Falls in the footsteps of her great-great-grand uncle. And I was reminded again of what a great raconteur she is, and thought what a lovely dinner guest she would make.

5. Which one of your characters would you never invite into your home and why?

I suppose I would have to say my muggers. But they did prompt me to think about others' experier

of walking and produce a book about it, so – apart from the contents of my handbag, and my nerve a while – all was not lost.

6. Ernest Hemingway said: write drunk, edit sober. For or against?

Alas, I fall asleep when drunk. The real question is – was Hemingway drunk or sober when he dispensed this advice?

7. If against, are you for any other mind altering drug?

Not advisable when you're attempting to write non-fiction.

8. Our adult competition theme is Feast, Famine and Potluck. Have you ever put food in your fiction? If so, what part did it play in the story?

I think way back I was told not to eat while walking, and there seems to be an absence of food in my book. There is some sex, though.

9. What's the most annoying question anyone's ever asked you in an interview?

Where did you park?

10. If you could be any author other than yourself, who would you be?

Matthew, Mark, Luke or John – just for a month or so – I'm sure you had to be there.

11. If you could go back in time and erase one thing you had written from your writing history, what would it be and why?

Comments on other people's blogs. They seem to hang around for longer than our books.

12. What's the most blatant lie you've ever told?

I got an artist friend to change my date of birth on my passport, so I could fly under-25 when I was : It was a long time ago. I have a new passport now.

13. If someone reviews you badly, do you write them into your next book/story and kill them?

I think at the time I hoped she'd fall on her face while out walking, but I got over it.

14. What's your favourite bad reviewer revenge fantasy?

It probably involves a bus.

15. What's the most frustrating thing about being a writer in Africa?

For several years' work, most of us earn from our creative writing enough to support ourselves for a few weeks.

16. Have you ever written naked?

It sometimes feels like it.

17. Does writing sex scenes make you blush?

At the moment, editing others' sex scenes is making me blush.

18. Who would play you in the film of your life?

Bwahaha.

19. If you won the Caine Prize for African Fiction, what would you do with the money?

Write more fiction.

20. What do you consider your best piece of work to date?

Slow Motion: stories about walking.

21. What are you doing on 21 June 2013, to celebrate Short Story Day Africa?

I will probably be at home, editing someone else's novel, smiling about the days getting longer.

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Andie Miller, South Africa

Quick URL

Travelling in Time and Space: Explorations of movement through our physical, virtual and literary spaces

by Andie Miller on Jul 21st, 2012 [Tweet](#)  Like 15

The beginnings of a project...

Introduction

I am thinking about the word pedestrian. It is defined by my Oxford Concise dictionary as a ‘person walking rather than travelling in a vehicle’. Also ‘dull’ and ‘uninspired’. From the French for ‘going foot’, and also ‘written in prose’.

And prose, says Oxford, is ‘ordinary written or spoken language, without metrical structure’, ‘another term for sequence’, and to ‘talk tediously’.

I must say at the outset that I enjoy being a pedestrian, ambling from place to place, and thinking of my feet. It takes longer, but there’s more texture along the way. I can think of nothing more uninspired than being stuck in traffic. And unlike chess master Bruce Pandolfini, who says, ‘[to gain space, you usually have to sacrifice time](#)’,¹ I choose to sacrifice space (physical space, at any rate) – and distance travelled – in order to gain time.

I rarely have the luxury of time though, like the Parisian [flâneurs](#) – those nineteenth century bourgeois bohemian gentlemen of leisure² – to ‘promenade without purpose’.³ Walking for me – though slow and enjoying the experience along the way – is usually in order to get from one place to another. So I intend to take this opportunity to stroll through the arcade of ideas, with no fixed destination, and merely examine what I encounter along the way, and see where it leads.

Apart from the question of time, another limitation of walking in the physical world, particularly as a woman, and in a city like Johannesburg (‘a city of rape, rather than cafés’⁴), is the issue of safety. Historically, as feminist scholar Janet Wolff points out in her [Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture](#), women’s participation in public spaces has been restricted, and the flâneuse has been largely invisible. Flânerie has been dominated by the ‘[male gaze](#)’. But, though for the most part it is no longer considered disreputable for a woman to be unaccompanied in public spaces, she is, however, increasingly vulnerable to physical attack.

Rebecca Solnit, in her [Wanderlust: A History of Walking](#), says reviewer Andrew O’Hehir, also ‘observes the sexism and snobbery inherent in [\[Walter\] Benjamin](#)’s idea of the flâneur, the idle, solitary gentleman strolling through the crowds, but she can’t quite resist it. In describing Benjamin’s writing she seems to be half-consciously describing her own: “more or less scholarly in subject, but full of beautiful aphorisms and leaps of imagination, a scholarship of evocation rather than definition.”‘

This brings us to the question of safety (or not?) in the world of ideas.

Academic Byways

There is always the risk in scholarly circles, of being open to attack when deviating from tried and tested paths. As the language of academia illustrates, it is born of a model for combat. So-and-so ‘argues’, or she ‘attacks’ someone else’s thesis, and as anyone completing a doctorate degree knows she will need to go through the obligatory ‘defence’ of her thesis. In socio-linguist [Deborah Tannen](#) [view](#)



It’s related to the history of our universities going back to the medieval university which was a seminary. It grew out of the religious framework in which the early monks were warrior monks, Christian soldiers, and the universities were set up in this way. They were seminaries, but they were set up on a military model. And the fact that it was all-male was definitely a factor; they took men out of their homes, and put them in this isolated environment; they had a secret language, Latin; they read about military exploits, and they had to learn to dispute publicly. It was not search for knowledge, it was honing your disputation skills so that you could publicly defend a thesis and attack a thesis. This is the history of our intellectual tradition (Tannen and Toms, 1998).

Maverick writer and theorist, Susan Griffin, explores the tendency towards patriarchal language in intellectual discourse in her 1978 book *Woman and Nature*. The voice she writes in, intended as a parody of this patriarchal tone, ‘rarely uses a personal pronoun, never speaks of “I” or “we”, and almost always implies that it has found absolute truth, or at least has the authority to do so.’

Griffin’s friend and Professor of *Somatics* at the *California Institute for Integral Studies*, *Don Hanlon Johnson*, a former Jesuit priest, is concerned with ‘the diseased ways we have organized our world based on giving precedence to a peculiar kind of “Reason” over the body, women, children, and marginal cultures’. In his essay, *Sitting, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Yearning: Reflections on Scholarly Shaping Techniques*, he encourages a loosening up in the language we use to educate.



Schools are the factories of language; their pedagogies will be crucial in determining whether the move from the preverbal to the verbal creates an adult who is in contact with the world, or one who exists depressed in a chronic state of alienation and dissociation. The great fissure between those worlds is the region explored by the poets, novelists, and the creative non-fiction writers, where the density of language has the feel of gesture, kicking, and gurgling. Neither the human science texts nor the pop psychology books nor many of the rich intellectual texts successfully bridge the gap between the non-verbal and the verbal. It takes a great deal of communal work to do this, and like with body practices, inhibition is crucial, or Calvinic enlightening, or Carsonic excision. Eliminating the gossip, the attempts to impress, the extra burdens which obscure the brilliance, the stressful, the ambiguous. Liberating the body from chronically false facial expressions, stressful posturing, and liberating the text so that it elicits our deeply felt yearnings for knowing and thoughtful action (Johnson, 2002).

Beyond the constraints of the formality of the language we use to educate, as Johnson points out, is ‘the gossip’, and the apparently endlessly self-referential nature of the academic body of knowledge which gives the impression of an elite club, that only admits thinkers who conform to accepted patterns of ‘discourse’, and wear a particular brand of walking shoes. Those who cite the correct friends: ‘What in your bibliography?’

James Hillman and Michael Ventura, authors of *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse*, were adamant that they weren’t going to buy into that, and were uncompromising in their desire to explore the territory in new ways. Says Ventura

We wanted an informal, wild, even funny book about therapy that takes chances, breaks rules, runs lights. To do this, we decided to stick to spoken, friendly (and hence irreverent) speech, and the conversational prose of letters. Why? Because psychotherapy wants and demands to be questioned even attacked, in the form it prefers: staid, contained, well-behaved – in other words, like any established institution, the psychotherapy industry wants to be addressed in a manner that accepts basic codes of conduct, and therefore, by implication, it’s basic goals, of conduct. But if you fall for it then instead of questioning those codes and goals, perhaps you’re accepting them more than you know, reinforcing them by playing by their rules (Hillman and Ventura, 1992, p. vii).

So instead they chose a different route, ‘and made the book you hold... which we are not so much writing as improvising.’ Those who complain that the book has no footnotes or bibliography (there is an abundance of references in the text), have missed its spontaneity, and ultimately the point.

Psychotherapy’s goals, suggest Hillman and Ventura, are to iron out our kinks, or idiosyncrasies, or acorns⁵ or daimons. In the same way perhaps, academia attempts to medicate or tame (no doubt it would argue, discipline) our use of language. Bearing in mind the ideas of Michel de Certeau, who

talks about the ‘style’ of language involving ‘a peculiar processing of the symbolic’,⁶ perhaps academia is guilty – in the interests of uniformity of style, ‘empiricism’ and ‘logic’ – of demanding that too much of its writing be overly formal and literal. And in this way it limits the flow of creativity and the emergence of new ideas.

Deborah Tannen suggests that there is an over-emphasis on debate – with its expectation of a winner rather than on *conversation*. Perhaps this is because, as Hillman puts it, ‘conversation isn’t easy’.



The word means turning around with, going back, like reversing, and it comes supposedly from walking back and forth with someone or something, turning and going over the same ground from the reverse direction. A conversation turns things around. And there is a verso to every conversation, a reverse, back side...

Whatever keeps us walking together with something and turns things around, upside down, converts what we already feel and think into something unexpected – this is the unconscious becoming conscious...

And to keep turning means that it’s no use having fixed stands, definite positions. That stops conversation dead in its tracks. Our aim is not to take a stand on this or that issue, but to examine the stands themselves so they can be loosened and we can go on walking back and forth (Hillman and Ventura, 1992, pp. 99–100).

Moving through Cities

Of course it is physically impossible in contemporary society to walk everywhere we need to get to, and so ironically, walking in the city is largely dependent on the availability of public transport. In cities where public transport systems are inadequate, walking is generally considered a pastime of the poor or eccentric. As the popular phrase goes, ‘time is money’,⁷ and walking is considered costly. The fallen angel in Wim Wenders’s film *Faraway, So Close!*, Emit Flesti (Time Itself, backward) argues that time is in fact the absence of money. This makes sense if we consider that the one thing a majority of people in affluent societies have in short supply, is time.

Of course time alone is not useful. And in attempting to strike a balance between time and money, it seems that speed has become the commodity to be sought after. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman points out, those without access to speed are ‘marooned in the opposite world... crushed under the burden of abundant, redundant and useless time they have nothing to fill with’.⁸ And given time constraints, speed determines how far we can travel. With enough money, like Mark Shuttleworth, you could travel to outer space.

But for those of us still on the ground, each city has its own set of challenges. Not the least of which, in cities like London and New York, is the near standstill caused by the number of cars on the road. As Naparstek’s response to the traffic in New York was to produce a book of *honkus*



hot, angry, selfish
drivers. microcosm of
the planet’s problems

he writes. His book, subtitled ‘The Zen Antidote to Road Rage’, is designed to be kept in the ‘glove compartment’ of the car, to keep you occupied when you’re stuck in traffic, and about to lose your cool.

British author, Ben Elton, had a similarly literary response to the London traffic, with his novel *Gridlock*.



Gridlock is when a city dies.

Killed in the name of freedom. Killed in the name of oil and steel. Choked on carbon monoxide and strangled with a pair of fluffy dice.

How did it come to this? How did the ultimate freedom machine end up paralysing us all? How did we end up driving to our own funeral, in somebody else's gravy train? (Elton, 1992)

Not me! I'm still walking... But this doesn't save me from the speed demon, I discover.

In London, walking in the underground, I had the constant feeling that I would be run over. By another human. So I decided on a solution. I would step aside and let those who were in more of a hurry than me pass. Except there was nowhere to step aside to. I was met with glares and curses. Nothing to do but keep on moving...

Well at least London had a workable public transport system. Los Angeles, I discover, does not. In fact, I even see a sign at an entrance off Sunset Boulevard, down which I'm walking (not without incredulous stares from motorists passing by) that reads: 'Pedestrians not allowed.' Now this is a form of discrimination I've not encountered before!

But it hasn't always been like this, I find out. Until the 50s, LA had one of the best public transport systems in the world.⁹ General Motors ('If it's good for General Motors it's good for America' went their slogan), through its corporate front company, National City Lines, bought out, and purposeful caused the demise of the popular 'red car' trolley system.

Despite its best attempts at projecting an image of glamour, Hollywood is now just a smoggy industrial town. As playwright Carol Kaplan puts it: 'Hollywood is a state of mind.'¹⁰ A fantasy left over from the 1950s. Or as [Michel de Certeau so poetically explains](#): 'these words... slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition.'¹¹ The fruits of Hollywood's industry remain far more glamorous than this town of wheeling and dealing and steel.

It's ironic that it takes a Hollywood movie, Robert Zemeckis's 1988 *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, to be the [broader exposé](#); of General Motors' manipulation of LA to an automotive society. As Judge Doom says in the movie



I see a place where people get on and off the freeway. On and off, off and on all day, all night! Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see! My God, it'll be beautiful!

And now, walking down Sunset Boulevard, dwarfed by giant billboards, I can see what he means; but as a pedestrian, it's not beautiful. (No guys, I'm not a hooker!)

I feel like a character in another Hollywood movie: Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, where the protagonist's chosen means of transporting himself from his smoggy industrial town seems to be Latin escapist music.

As far as General Motors goes, they were found guilty in 1949 of 'conspiring to monopolize sales of buses and supplies to companies owned by National City Lines'. They were fined \$5000. But the

damage was done.

Today more people drive cars in LA than anywhere else in the US. And there's a painfully inadequate bus service, used almost exclusively by those who can't afford to buy their own cars.¹² A bus service discover, which is tedious to use. It's time to go home.

Johannesburg has a very different, though no less convoluted or manipulated history as far as its public transport is concerned. Apartheid architecture meant that the majority of black people were forced to live far outside of the city and the suburbs, and commute long distances to work. The bus services provided were grossly inadequate, and so the minibus taxi industry was born.

These taxis were nicknamed 'Zolas', after South Africa's barefoot runner Zola Budd, because of their speed and ability to 'zip, zip, zip' through the traffic. The nickname took an ironic turn, though, when Zola inadvertently tripped American contender Mary Decker at the 1984 Olympics, since the taxis are no less notorious for getting in the way and causing accidents. Unlike Zola Budd, however, the taxis are still out in full force, wreaking havoc in their paths. As someone once pointed out though, 'just imagine if everyone using the taxis was driving their own car! Take a breath, and let them in.' Indeed Or in my case, take a breath before you board. It's as hair raising being in a Zola as it is driving among them. But without them, I'd be a lot more housebound.¹³

When I am confined to the house, however, it doesn't mean I don't get around. On the contrary.

Virtual Spaces

For those of us who spend a lot of time online, the idea of space being 'virtual', becomes almost insignificant; as we require similar things from this space that we do from our streets. Information Architect Adam Greenfield recognises this, and he has an unusually visionary approach to designing web sites. He sees very little difference between the way we might choose to organise our books, or physical spaces, and the way we walk through our days; and the way we organise information in our virtual spaces. He is as likely to be found citing Guy Debord's *dérive*,¹⁴ and other 'frantic ravings of dead French intellectuals', as he is Jeffrey Zeldman's latest pearl of web design wisdom.¹⁵ Of his personal website, v-2, he says, 'I've crafted this site to reflect... The life of cities. Life in cities. The shelter we devise and the tools we imagine. The ways in which symbols move us. The experience of being human at this time in history.' Clearly for him, our virtual spaces are simply extensions of the world in which we live.

Asked provocatively by his former boss, 'What is the feng shui of a website?' Greenfield says: 'I began to consider the idea. Feng shui, to me, isn't some mystical, new-agey perversion, some farce of mirrors and colors and fishtanks. I think of it as a highly practical discipline, studying patterns of human movement in space and time – about as mystical as mass-transit planning.'

When asked how he would define information architecture, he says, 'trying to empathize with what user wants to do, and facilitating her doing it... getting out of the user's way'.

The Internet is used differently by different people. For many it's merely a practical tool: a place to access and send information,¹⁶ and to make appointments. But for others it is a place where the boundaries between information and communication begin to blur. Less important than accessing a piece of writing, might be accessing it's author, and – if she is willing – the space to discuss her idea. As Federico Mayer, former Director General of UNESCO has said, the nature of present day education has less to do with access to information – which all but the poorest of the poor have in one form or another – and more about learning what to do with it.¹⁷ In other words, how to think for ourselves. This doesn't happen in isolation. Very often it is the conversation that helps us do it. Whether in a classroom situation, or online, it is in the movement of the conversation – rather than the reading – where real learning occurs.

Spaces Merge

In many ways our virtual space has opened up our literary space. An author's work may no longer be as narrow and solitary a process as it previously was. A conversation with a reader might interrupt her in the middle of writing a new piece, which in turn may in some way inform her conclusions. Likewise the reader, being forced to think, frame and articulate questions and ideas in writing – rather than the often sloppy way in which we articulate ideas verbally; peppered with likes, I means, and you know develops her writing skill, and she becomes, a writer. In the process of learning to articulate her own narrative (Who are you? Where are you sitting as you write? Where are the paths that you walk? Is it hot or cold there?) she learns the art of storytelling.

As Hillman puts it



Writing [in therapy] seems mostly confined to transcripts of the oral sessions and to case reports digesting the session. Now these transcripts and case reports are intolerable to read. They are universally the same and utterly boring. Not that the hours themselves were boring, but the written records certainly are. Why boring? Because the language itself consists of dead words, clichés, rhythmless repetitions, generalized conventional terms without the lustre or the lilt of the soul's songs of itself. Yes, even depression – or, as it should be called, melancholia and despair – has a cadence and a pitch and a vocabulary.

How rare it is to speak well about ourselves. Write well, we can do. Poems, short stories of childhood, biographical excursions, even descriptions of intense emotions – these all are the very stuff of writing. But the soul seems reluctant to speak well of itself. When I try to tell you directly what I feel and what's going on inside, personally, there comes a jumble of circumlocutions, coagulated phrases, interrupted qualifications, "[Undisciplined squads of emotion!](#)" as T. S. Eliot said. Is this confused reluctance perhaps the very source of writing? As if the soul needs to find a way out of its own inarticulate morass by means of the hand's deft linear skill. Writing as the thread out of the labyrinth ([Hillman and Ventura, 1992, pp. 89-90](#)).

Boundaries Shift

But this opening up of possibilities does not treat all travellers kindly. And even in the virtual world seems, what divides us is speed. As [Guy Berger](#) – head of [Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University](#) – observed ironically, 'in the future, the difference between the haves and the have-nots will be [bandwidth](#)'. Maya Drozd adds that those of us without broadband access, spend much of our time '[waiting for instantaneity](#)'. Says [Adam Greenfield](#): 'I didn't have any particular interest in designing the Web until I was exposed to broadband on a daily basis'. But he continues that he 'held on to the memory of what it felt like to surf the Web with a dial-up connection. And when I got around to working on the design and implementation of our own site, I made damn sure that those users' needs were reflected in our requirements document.'

For the majority of global citizens, however, the issue of speed is a relatively minor one. Rather, it is the experience of being transported to strange new places (or strange new places being transported to you) that can be disturbing. As Michael Ventura illustrates



An Inventory of Timelessness... Item: Life in Clarendon, a town of about fourteen hundred in the Texas Panhandle, revolves around its several fundamentalist

churches. Like many towns in that part of the country, it's still "dry"; you can't buy alcohol within the city limits. But not too long ago an AM/PM convenience store opened. It never closes... Why do they need such a thing in such a town?

Until recently in the Texas Panhandle, you could tune in two, sometimes three television stations... The stations signed off around midnight, often earlier. Now, with satellite and cable, there are many, many stations, dozens and dozens, and they never sign off. Some of those stations show porn in the wee hours. And MTV all of the time. Constant news. And movies that no one in the panhandle would ever have heard of otherwise... It is no longer separate in space; it no longer has farmer's sense of time ([Hillman and Ventura](#), 1992, pp. 114–116).¹⁸

In the African context, Ian Henderson of the *African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Dispute* sees the major challenges as situated in a growing urban/rural split, or what he sees as a 'central/peripheral' divide.

“ Global power structures are fast changing from a north-south split, to a centre-periphery arrangement of power, with power centres concentrated in the resource-rich north, but distributed also across the major cities of the south. The major urban power centres of the developing world are places where a middle class young person, whether Kenyan or Malaysian, may be indistinguishable from his New York brethren – wearing Nikes, clutching a cellphone and speaking in techno-babble. On the periphery in contrast, society continues to operate as it has for centuries, separated from the power centres by the seemingly impenetrable barriers of education, finance and access (Henderson, 1998).

And while the inhabitants of cities are arguably more familiar with dealing with change, chaos, and novelty, the growing influx of people from the rural areas find it hard to adapt. As [Liz Gunner](#) observes in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, he explores 'the rural shadow of the city', and 'none of Mpe's characters survive "Our Hillbrow"'.¹⁹

Conclusion

At the outset of these wanderings, I warned that I promised no conclusions, beyond those suggested by the explorations themselves. The time has come to conclude merely because time has run out. Even in our scientific research, is this ever really any different? As philosopher [Alan Watts](#) put it

“ We feel that we decide rationally because we base our decisions on collecting relevant data about the matter in hand. ... [but] how do we know when we have collected enough information upon which to decide? If we were rigorously 'scientific' in collecting information for our decisions, it would take us so long to collect the data that the time for action would have passed long before the work had been completed. ... we go through the motions of gathering the necessary information in a rational way, and then, just because of a hunch, or because we are tired of thinking, or because the time has come to decide, we act (Watts, 1957, p. 34.).

If I had the time, perhaps I could have drifted endlessly, but even the *Situationists* discovered that it could be counter-productive. As Ivan Chtcheglov observed

“ The *dérive* (with its flow of acts, its gestures, its strolls, its encounters) was *to the totality* exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language. Let yourself go with the flow of words, says the psychoanalyst. He listens, until the moment when he rejects or modifies (one could say *detourns*) a word, an expression or a definition. ... But just as analysis unaccompanied with anything else is almost always *contraindicated*, so continual *dériving* is dangerous to the extent that the individual, having gone too far (not without bases, but...) without defenses [sic], is threatened with explosion, dissolution, dissociation, disintegration (Ivan Chtcheglov, “Letter from Afar,” *Internationale Situationniste* #9, p. 38.).

As I’m sure Hillman and Ventura would agree, it’s good to know when the session is over, and to leave the room, and go back out into the world.

Don Hanlon Johnson, in *Sitting, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Yearning: Reflections on Scholar-Ship Techniques*, suggests

“ There is, of course, the obvious location of ‘The Body’ in higher level curricula of humanistic studies, the plethora of texts with ‘Body’ in the title or subtitle, the endless conferences and debates about the current viability of Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray, ... And yet, what about the weary bodies that are required to sit there listening to all the babble, struggling to stay awake at night keeping up with the pages of high-level gossip about the intellectualized, gendered, ethnicized, bruised body, that body right before our noses (Johnson, 2002).

And while you have been sporting enough to play along with my metaphor of strolling through the intellectual arcade, I have of course been sitting for hours, on a chair, under my own nose; and have grown rather stiff while thinking, writing, reflecting (as perhaps you have while reading).

It’s time, I think, for us both to get up, stretch, and go out for a walk.

Notes

¹ Bruce Pandolfini (1986) *The 64 Commandments of Chess*, In *The ABCs of Chess: Invaluable detailed lessons for players of all levels*.

² For a detailed history of the flâneur, see Charles Baudelaire (1863) *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*; Walter Benjamin (1983) *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the era of High Capitalism*; Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project*; and Rebecca Solnit (2001) *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*.

³ University of Manchester, *Visual Culture and the Contemporary City*, Online Certificate in Sociology.

⁴ Michael Titlestad, ‘Writing the City’ seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 12 March 2003.

⁵ For more information on Hillman’s ‘acorn theory’, see James Hillman and Michael Ventura (1992) *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse*; and James Hillman, (1997) *The Soul’s Code: In search of character and calling*.

⁶ Michel De Certeau (1984) Walking in the City, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 100.

⁷ A Google search on the phrase 'time is money' yields 96 200 results on 24 April 2003.

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman (1998) *Globalization: The Human Consequences*.

⁹ Jim Klein and Martha Olson (1996) *Taken for a Ride*. New Day Films. (52 mins). See the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) press release for more information about this film.
http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov1996/takenforaride/takenforaride_press.pdf

¹⁰ Personal communication.

¹¹ Michel De Certeau (1984) Walking in the City, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 104.

¹² See Sikivu Hutchinson (2003) *Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation Politics in Los Angeles*, for an analysis of how the (d)evolution of the LA public transport system has further entrenched divisions in the city along racial (class) and gender lines.

¹³ See Dumisane Phakathi's 2000 film, *Rough Ride*, for an in depth history of the minibus taxi industry in South Africa.

¹⁴ The *dérive* has been described as 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances'.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Zeldman is arguably considered the current guru of web design.

¹⁶ I have deliberately resisted saying *exchange* information here, since for many of its more practical users, there is very little exchange involved.

¹⁷ Lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, 1996.

¹⁸ As I was typing this paragraph, I received – at 12.25 am on a Saturday morning (why?) – an e-mail reminding me that my annual internet subscription payment is due, and if my banking details have changed, the amount will automatically be debited from my bank account.

¹⁹ Liz Gunner (2003) *Writing the City: Four Post-Apartheid Texts*. Advanced Research Seminar, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 24 February 2003.

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Quick URL

If Kapuscinski had a weblog

by Andie Miller on Jun 23rd, 2012 [Tweet](#) [Like 0](#)

An early history of blogging.

Written for 'Creative Writing for Journalists', Graduate Journalism Programme, Wits University, June 2004.

Introduction

Since the beginning of 1999, when there were only 23 weblogs known to be in existence ([Blood, 2000](#)) and the subsequent introduction of free and easy-to-use software, there has been an explosion of them on the Internet: 'two million and counting' ([Rosen, 2004](#)). They are now commonly referred to as blogs, and their keepers are known as bloggers.²

There have been numerous debates about what a weblog is (and even more about what it is not), but more recently the debate has progressed to whether weblogs can be considered journalism or not. [The fall 2003 issue](#)³ of the *Nieman Reports*, of the [Nieman Foundation for Journalism](#) at Harvard University, dedicated thirty pages to exploring the relationship between weblogs and journalism. Eighteen 'bloggers and journalists (some whom wear both hats)' shared their perspectives, but they continued to disagree on whether blogs can be considered journalism (Nieman, 2003, pp. 59-98).

So what is a weblog?

Most simply put, a weblog is a webpage of dated entries that are reverse-chronological, and include a mix of commentary and links. The commentary can vary from [brief and pithy remarks](#) on a round-up of links, to [extended essays](#) with links to sources embedded in the texts.

Apart from [organisational weblogs](#), and those maintained by [professional journalists](#), they are the work of hobbyists and amateurs – from amare 'to love' (Oxford, 1999).⁴

They can be [subject specific](#), or [not](#), [serious](#) or [irreverent](#), and the range spans the spectrum of [personal journals](#), to an [eyewitness account of the war in Iraq](#).⁵

The more sophisticated bloggers excel at 'pulling the threads of a story together' ([Rosen, 2004](#)), and integrating several different news sources, by scouring the coverage available online, and presenting their own thesis on the story, with links to various accounts of the story. By doing this, one reader

comments that she is able to ‘keep up on current news and events from multiple perspectives’ (Coi 2004). The majority of blogs are participatory,⁶ by providing a comments section for readers. Most bloggers are willing to engage in conversation with anyone desiring genuine dialogue, and they leave themselves open to being challenged on their facts and their views. In *the words of* Jeff Jarvis of *BuzzMachine*, ‘news is a conversation’ (Jarvis, 2003). All that is required is a computer and access to Internet connection.

The case of Daily Summit (www.dailysummit.net)

In 2002 British writer and policy analyst, [David Steven](#), embarked on a novel undertaking. He persuaded the British Council to fund a weblog, which he would run live for the duration, from the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). As he wrote to Rebecca Blood:



I’ve long been interested in the potential of blogging to open a window onto major events. We now have the chance to report on what happens when you ask 106 world leaders and 65,000 other delegates to come up with a ‘blueprint for the 21st century’.

At the moment, the site is tracking preparations for the event and reflecting opinion from across the political spectrum. We officially launch on 19 August and will be live from [Joburg](#) a few days later. To be honest, we don’t know what will happen then, but the idea is to wander the streets and the corridors, picking up the news and the gossip and post to the site as often as a working internet connection looms into view (Steven, August 2002a).

Blood, then recently the author of *The Weblog Handbook*, [responded](#) on her blog:



Weblogs as journalism? If you’ve read my book, you know that I’m skeptical—I think the form excels at filtering, media criticism, and eye-witness accounting but is generally ill-suited to offering an original, complete story of an event. But this has potential (Blood, 2002).

A year after WSSD, Blood had not changed her mind. She [wrote](#) in the *Guardian* that ‘Weblogs can be used in journalism, but they are not, in themselves, works of journalism... News organisations now frequently maintain their own weblogs – a practice pioneered by the Guardian – and a few independent weblogs contain original reporting, but these are comparatively rare’ (Blood, 2003).

Her main concern seems to be that ‘those who try to define the phenomenon in terms of current institutions are completely missing the point’ (Blood, 2003). JD Lasica, a contributing editor at the *Online Journalism Review* (who maintains his own blog, *JD’s New Media Musings*) [explains](#): ‘The fear is that if this gets coopted by the mass media, it will just become another traditional media outlet’ (Lasica, 2002). Arguably, however, in her ongoing need to define weblogs as distinct, Blood is undermining their being recognised as an alternative news source.

Where are the gatekeepers?

One of the first arguments from those in the mainstream media who are vehement that weblogs can be considered journalism is the issue of gatekeepers. ‘Who edits these people?’ asked Aaron Brown, CNN’s lead news anchor. Joan Connell, former executive producer for opinion and communities at

MSNBC, says that she ‘would submit that (the newsroom) editing function really is the factor that makes it journalism’ ([Lasica, 2003](#)).

But others have suggested that ‘the newsroom’ involves complex processes ([Shoemaker, 1991](#)), and is exposure to the organisational culture, its practices, professional codes, and influences – rather than mere editorial intervention – that produces a journalist, knowledgeable in the methods of news production. There is a learned set of values and behaviour, they argue, around what is said to be new and around sourcing and verification. A journalist earns credibility and authority through this process and with the endorsement of a credible newsroom. Only in this way can news be fairly and accurately reported.

Many bloggers, however, disagree. Matt Haughey, the creator of [Metafilter](#), a blog which has been in existence since early 1999, believes that it is readers and the community that act as gatekeepers ([Raynsford, 2003](#)).

Christopher Allbritton – an ‘independent journalist’ who maintained his blog, [Back to Iraq](#), from Iraq solely from financial contributions from his readers – puts it this way: ‘Instead of having one editor I had thousands... After I referred to my mountain journey as being like a “Bataan Death March,” I got a very public mea culpa. Some of my readers had lost relatives on that much more hellish journey; they had complained on the site’s public comment section about my choice of words’ ([Nieman, 2003](#), pp. 84-85).

Another reader, commenting on Allbritton’s site, gave reasons for preferring blogs to mainstream media coverage:



... what is different in Iraqi blogs, and in the firsthand information I gain from my relatives in Baghdad, is that it’s about the details. Print media, in Europe or (the) U.S., may offer good stories, but they are about the grander scheme of things. Putting things in political context and all....

I cannot relate to the U.S. administration and the Shia Sunni relations. However, I can relate to the hot roof on [Riverbend](#)’s house. I can relate to the lack of electricity in [Salam](#)’s house. I can relate to the flowers that get dusted over by the dirt that comes with bombing, in the garden of my father-in-law in Baghdad. I can relate to you, Christoffer (sic), when a bomb explodes on one of your first days in Baghdad...

That’s what you basically offer me, Christoffer: you make it more personal than it already was.

Perhaps war should be made as personal as it gets ([Allbritton, 2004](#)).

By Connell’s standards, though, and those like her who argue that editorial intervention is key, Allbritton’s blog – despite his training from the [Graduate School of Journalism](#) at Columbia University – would not qualify as journalism. Having a public and a conscience, without acting on behalf of an established institution, is not enough.⁷

Those bloggers who compare accounts of stories, and refer to secondary sources, assert that it is the act of linking to these sources that makes their analysis transparent. In the area of transparency, blogs are often seen by some to be ahead of the mainstream media ([Nieman, 2003](#), pp. 61-63).

‘When I’m reading a blog that features reportage or fact-checking,’ says Haughey, ‘I can determine myself if the author is being factual because they’ll reveal their sources in links, and I can read up on them to determine how impartial they are being. If they’re not sticking to standards, it’ll be noticed by readers and other webbloggers, who will take the author to task for the impropriety’ ([Raynsford, 2003](#)).

Academic and new media consultant, Clay Shirky, puts it [this way](#): The order of things in broadcast “filter, then publish.” The order in communities is ‘publish, then filter’” (Shirky, 2002). Blood adds ‘Bloggers who reference but do not link material, that might, in its entirety, undermine their conclusions, are intellectually dishonest’ (Nieman, 2003, pp. 61-63).

It is worth mentioning here that the [Drudge Report](#), the website of former [Fox News Channel](#) talk show host Matt Drudge – while it is a popular news source (with a [Google PageRank](#) of 8/10), since his coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal – is not technically a blog, since it does not follow the basic requirements of the blog format: reverse-chronological entries, with commentary accompanying the links provided. For this reason, Drudge’s reporting is not transparent, and remains questionable.

Regarding the question of gatekeeping, a cynic might argue that if a journalist is unethical, and determined to lie and fabricate, he or she will manage to get around whatever gatekeeping structures are in place.

Charles Lane, the former [New Republic](#) editor responsible, in 1998, for finally exposing [Stephen Glass](#) their 25 year-old ‘rising star’, who wrote dozens of high-profile articles in which he made up people, quotations, places, events, and even entire organisations with websites (Kroft, 2003) – suggests that the reason Glass’s tall stories were believed, and made it past the gatekeepers, is because ‘They fit into pre-existing grooves that are already etched into everybody’s heads, things we think or are predisposed to believe are true’ (Rowe, 2004).⁸

More recently, as revealed in April 2003, there was the case of [Jayson Blair](#), who was discovered to have ‘plagiarized quotes and fabricated material in more than 35 of his articles’ (Kroft, 2003). And this was the [New York Times](#), with a relatively large staff employed for fact-checking.⁹

A pragmatic sub-editor might say that the major difference between a newspaper and a blogger is that a newspaper can be sued. This will make a newspaper avoid publishing anything that’s obviously inadequately researched, biased, or – most importantly – potentially libellous ([The Australian](#), 2000)¹⁰

What is journalism?

The view of JD Lasica, is that bloggers are ‘engaging in random acts of journalism whenever they report on events they witness first-hand or when they offer analysis, background or commentary on a newsworthy topic’ (Raynsford, 2003). Matthew Buckland – editor of South Africa’s [Mail & Guardian online](#), and a contributor to the Poynter Institute’s blog [E-Media Tidbits](#) – is [more circumspect](#). Though he cites probably the most famous blogger, [Salam Pax](#), (particularly since Pax has become a mainstream columnist for the [Guardian](#), and published a [book](#)¹¹) as ‘one blog I did get excited about’ he cautions readers: ‘when reading your next blog, just remember, it is unlikely to be a piece of ‘journalism’ you’re reading’ (Buckland, 2004).

But Jay Rosen, press critic and current chair of journalism at New York University, suggests that we are asking the wrong question with the ‘are weblogs journalism?’ debate, which he sees as ‘tired’. He [writes](#) on his weblog, [PressThink](#):



By ‘journalism’ we ought to mean the practice of it, not the profession of it. Journalism can happen on any platform. It is independent of its many delivery devices. This also means that journalism is not the same thing – at all – as ‘the media.’ The media, or Big Media as some call it, does not own journalism, and cannot dispose of it on a whim (Rosen, 2004).

Rather, he suggests, we should be answering the question ‘what is journalism?’, and in this way – si

all weblogs are not equal – some will qualify, and many (the majority) will not. It means, however, those legitimately contributing to the production of news, by ‘addressing, engaging and freely informing a “public” about events in its world’ (Rosen, 2004), will receive credit where it is due, and taken seriously as an alternative news source.

Journalism, Rosen also believes, depends on ‘the awyeness of things’:

“ The harbor town small enough so that everyone knows when a new ship arrives needs no provider of shipping news. By going about its business, the town already has the news, so to speak...

In this sense, journalism is modern because the scale that requires it is modern.. (Rosen, 2004).

James W Carey, Professor of International Journalism at Columbia University, welcomed a group of new students to the Graduate School of Journalism with these words:

“ Journalism can be practiced virtually anywhere and under almost any circumstances. Just as medicine, for example, can be practiced in enormous clinics organized like corporations or in one-person offices, journalism can be practiced in multinational conglomerates or by isolated freelancers.... The practice does not depend on the technology or bureaucracy. It depends on the practitioner mastering a body of skill and exercising it to some worthwhile purpose (Carey, 1995).

The key issue here I think is the one of ‘mastering a body of skill’. By April 2004, even Rebecca Blood had begun to concede that what Steven had done was journalism. ‘When a reporter repeats a politician’s assertions without verifying whether they are true, that is not [journalism],’ she wrote on her weblog. ‘When a blogger writes up daily accounts of an international conference, as David Steven did at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, that is journalism’ (Blood, 2004).¹²

There is no doubt that blogs cannot replace the mainstream media – as public relations executive, Steve Rubel, demonstrated in his recent news experiment, where ‘he gave up his regular media habit (newspaper, online, radio, and to a lesser extent TV) and learned what was going on in the world solely by checking weblogs’ for a week¹³ – but he confirmed, says Steve Outing, senior editor at the Poynt Institute, that they ‘can become the primary entry point for people looking to stay current on niche topics.... An enterprising blogger/journalist could do well by figuring out how to own a topic – blogging the Tour de France, or Wimbledon, for instance’ (Outing, 2004a).

Says Outing of his own media consumption habits: ‘I track a bunch of blogs... [they] lead me to articles of interest to me on traditional-brand media sites’ (Outing, 2004b).

Kapu ci ski’s conundrum

On his return from WSSD in Johannesburg, writing from his home in Dorset on the South coast of England, Steven concluded that ‘Joburg felt like diving into a river, abandoning oneself to the strong currents, and then crawling out the other side.’ The Daily Summit weblog received 110 000 visits in two month period, against a target of 30 000, and feedback from visitors suggested that most found ‘highly original and useful resource’ (Steven, 2002c). ‘And so I’m wondering whether there are other rivers to cross.... The web offers opportunities for the agency reporter reborn,¹⁴ but without the

blockages Kapu ci ski complains about' (Steven, 2002b).

Steven was referring here to what Polish reporter and travel journalist, [Ryszard Kapu ci ski](#) – who “I covered 27 coups and revolutions in nearly as many countries” ([Jack, 2001](#)), and is considered “a p among journalists” ([World Press Review](#)) – had said in an [interview with Bill Buford](#) in *Granta* magazine¹⁵ fifteen years earlier:

“

My responsibility was always to cover an event: to locate the geopolitical story, and as quickly as possible send a cable down the line with its details.... [But] a press cable is a very conservative medium for conveying news. We are always limited: by the number of words, by the time we can get on the machine, by the money, by the information that the newspapers back home want to receive. But the realities we face, especially in the Third World, are so much richer, more complicated, than a newspaper will ever allow us to report.

It is not the story that is not getting expressed: it's what surrounds the story. The climate, the atmosphere of the street, the feeling of the people, the gossip of the town, the smell; the thousand, thousand elements of reality that are part of the event you read about in 600 words in your morning paper (Buford, 1987).

'A web log would have removed Kapu ci ski's "feeling of inadequacy",' Steven suggests. 'He'd still have had the immediacy, but he'd also have had the space to digress, embroider, and speculate. His story-telling could have been cumulative, rather than a series of discreet bulletins. Themes would have emerged over time. And he could have used back links to reawaken a story that new developments made seem prescient, poignant or even foolish' (Steven, 2002d).

Limitations in style and language had been a great source of frustration to Kapu ci ski as a journalist. As guest speaker at the first [Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage](#) in 2003 (now 71-years-old) [elaborated](#) on this:

“

... as a correspondent of a press agency, I had this unsatisfied feeling resulting from the paucity of the language of press information when confronting the rich, full-of-variety, colourful, often hard-to-define reality of those cultures, customs and beliefs.

The everyday language of information that we use in the media is very poor, stereotypical and formulaic.

For this reason, huge areas of reality we deal with are beyond the sphere of description, which the formulaic message is unable to convey (Kapuscinski, 2003).

His solution, he said, was to begin employing the techniques of the [New Journalism](#), following in the footsteps of writers like [Truman Capote](#) and [Norman Mailer](#); 'the kind of writing in which authentic events, true stories and accidents are described with language containing the writer's personal opinions and reactions' (Kapu ci ski, 2003).

Weblogs – the new New Journalism?

Weblogs have also been [compared](#) to the New Journalism.¹⁶ Sometimes to the 'gonzo' journalism

Hunter S Thompson – since in the most extreme cases they can be ‘opinionated, ranting, often incoherent and frequently biased with little regard for accuracy or balance’ (Raynsford, 2003) – but generally they resemble the New Journalism in the way that they borrow techniques from fiction. Things like dialogue, and most particularly: voice.¹⁷

Many weblogs resemble columns and opinion writing in the way that they highlight the personality of the writer. The best blogs have a ‘powerful, interesting and charismatic voice’, a ‘strong editorial voice’ (Conan, 2004), and as with regular newspaper columns, readers may frequent a blog because they agree with the point of view of the author, and enjoy his or her style of writing, or conversely like to hate it. Bloggers are frequently biased in their allegiances, but their weblogs are generally well researched. As Blood puts it, ‘Bloggers often find angles that professional reporters have missed, or questions reporters have neglected to ask.... Professional journalists, often working under extreme time pressure, may not have time to research a piece as thoroughly as they would like. Bloggers have no externally imposed deadlines, and no mandate to research equally the claims of both sides’ (Blood, 2004).

But in Steven’s experience, ‘As soon as I started working on *Daily Summit*, I had this strong sense that I shouldn’t be too opinionated. I wanted the site to have a distinctive “voice”, but not a clear point of view. I had dinner on the last night with Ronald Bailey, of *Reason* magazine, and lunch the next day with Michael Dorsey, of the *Sierra Club*. To be on good terms with political opposites felt like an achievement’ (Steven, 2004d).

And he agrees that what was once said to Hunter S Thompson about his style of journalism – ‘You throw yourself into the middle of a story and write your way out of it’ (Hahn, 1997) – could very well refer to his experience of blogging the WSSD.

In 2003 Steven went on to cover *Daily Summit 2* from the *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS) in Geneva, and the second phase of WSIS takes place in Tunis in 2005. ‘I have no doubt,’ he says, ‘that very soon, someone is going to push blogging onto the next level. Armchair bloggers can only go so far. But out on the road, there’s a new type of journalism waiting to be born’ (Steven, 2005). It is clear that he would like to be that someone.

After WSSD in 2002, he wrote to Blood: ‘I felt like I was on one of those ‘unplugged’ tours, just me, a guitar (well, website actually) and the audience.’

Steven doesn’t think of himself as a journalist (Otter, 2002); he finds definitions immaterial. But he added on a pragmatic note that it is really a question of access. Whether what he was doing was journalism or not, he ‘most definitely need[ed] a press card!’ (Steven, 2002e).¹⁸

And while *Tunis 2005* is still some way off, he is currently investigating ways of making it possible to become a full time roving blogger.

Conclusion

Just a couple of months ago, columnist and New Journalism veteran, Jimmy Breslin (now 74-years-old), said in an *interview*: ‘Don’t call me a journalist, I hate the word; it’s pretentious!’ He prefers to think of himself as a reporter. ‘The whole key is the amount of work you do,’ he said. ‘It all starts with the shoe leather... You can tell how you do it in your feet’ (Donadio, 2004).

Kapu ci ski said something similar years ago in his *conversation* with Bill Buford: ‘...for me, what I have to say is validated by the fact that I was there, that I witnessed the event. I sometimes call it literature by foot’ (Buford, 1987).

‘It was the same in Johannesburg,’ says Steven. ‘Maybe a dozen journalists were present for the climax of the political negotiations. The other 4000 were in a bed, bar or brothel. Why? Because they had no reason to be there. Their deadline was passed. They’d filed their story. Their editors didn’t want to

much detail. I, however, felt compelled to wait around. Like an agency reporter, I was on a continuous deadline. Most journalists I spoke to seemed bored by the summit and by their jobs. I had to force myself to go back to the hotel at night – there was always more to do/say/find out about’ (Steven, 2002d).

Whether we call them journalists or not, what bloggers invariably possess – that much of journalism with its deadlines and word-counts has killed in its reporters – is an enthusiasm for telling the story.

If a young Kapu ci ski was starting out today, and publishing his writing on a weblog, perhaps we wouldn’t call it journalism. Perhaps we would call it ‘[literary reportage](#)’, as Kapu ci ski himself describes his writing. But whatever we called it, we would be richer for his desire to experience the world, and his passion for sharing those stories with us.

Appendix A – Selected journalists who blog

Christopher Allbritton – [Back to Iraq](#)
Paul Andrews – [The Paul Wall](#)
Cory Doctorow – [bOINGbOING](#)
Jonathan Dube – [The Weblog Blog](#)
JD Lasica – [JD’s New Media Musings](#)
Peter Maass – [Peter Maass](#)
Rebecca MacKinnon – [Techjournalism](#)
Josh Marshall – [Talking Points Memo](#)
Steve Olafson – [The Brazosport News](#)
Tim Porter – [First Draft](#)
Jay Rosen – [PressThink](#)
Andrew Sullivan – [Daily Dish](#)

Appendix B – Selected media blogs

Chicago Tribune – [Eric Zorn’s Notebook](#)
Christian Science Monitor – [ScitechBlog](#)
The Dallas Morning News – [Opinion](#)
dotJournalism – [Guy Clapperton](#)
Guardian – [The Weblog](#)
Minnesota Public Radio – [The Blogging of the President: 2004](#)
MSNBC – [Altercation](#)
The New Republic – [&c.](#)
The New York Times – [Times on the Trail](#)
Poynteronline – [E-Media Tidbits](#)
Poynteronline – [Romenesko](#)
The Providence Journal – [Subterranean Homepage News](#)
Sacramento Bee – [California Insider](#)
Salon.com – [Scott Rosenberg’s Links & Comment](#)
Slate – [kausfiles](#)

Notes:

¹ The ‘Lifetime Achievement’ award, at [The Bloggies](#) weblog awards, is for ‘webloggers who have been blogging at least since October 1, 2000 .

² Opinions on who coined the term weblog vary, but Peter Merholz first used the term [blog](#) in May

1999, when he decided to pronounce the word wee-blog, which was then shortened simply to blog. August 1999 Pyra Labs released the [Blogger](#) software, 'And with that, the use of "blog" grew with the tool's success.'

³ You should be warned that, while all of these reports are available online, it is one large PDF file, which is slow to download for anyone with a dial-up connection.

⁴ While an increasing number of newspapers are now running blogs from their websites, maintained by journalists on their staff, it should be noted that former reporter Steve Olafson was fired from the *Houston Chronicle* for running a personal blog under a nom de plume. See Olafson, Steve. 2003. 'A Reporter is Fired for Writing a Weblog', in Nieman Reports, Fall 2003, pp. 91-92.

⁵ For more information on Salam Pax (not his real name), the 'Baghdad Blogger', see McCarthy, Ro (2003). '[Salam's story](#)', *Guardian*, 30 May, and Maass, Peter (2003). '[Salam Pax is Real](#)', *Slate*, 2 June.

For a detailed description of weblogs and their history, see Blood, Rebecca. 2000. '[Weblogs: A history and perspective](#)', *Rebecca's Pocket*, 7 September 2000.

⁶ For further information on participatory journalism, see Lasica, JD (2003). '[What is Participatory Journalism?](#)', *Online Journalism Review*, 7 August.

⁷ For an examination of 'the public', and shifting 'terms of authority' in the media, see Rosen, Jay (2003). '[Emerging Alternatives: Terms of Authority](#)', *Columbia Journalism Review*, Issue 5, September/October.

⁸ For a bibliography and archive of Glass's articles, see McGinnis, Rick. 2003. '[A Tissue of Lies: The Stephen R Glass Index](#)'.

⁹ Since then, on 15 March 2004, journalist Paul Andrews noticed an error in reporting in *The New York Times* that he [recorded on his blog](#). He came to the conclusion that 'The fact that this sailed through editorial chain at *The New York Times* makes me think the paper needs to analyze how it handles fact checking.'

For instances in which bloggers have played an unofficial watchdog role to institutional media, resulting in dismissals and policy changes, see Glaser, Mark (2004). '[To Their Surprise, Bloggers Are Force for Change in Big Media](#)', *Online Journalism Review*, 26 May.

¹⁰ While it may be a marketing ploy for the legal industry, attorney Michael Rothberg cautions that even bloggers should consider getting libel coverage, which 'is a lot like insuring your house against fire. The odds you'll ever need to use the policy are low, but the consequences of not having it when you need it can be catastrophic.' See Rothberg, Michael (2004). '[Online Publishing Risks Create Need for Libel Insurance](#)', *Online Journalism Review*, 20 February.

Mark Thompson also outlines some controversial potential lawsuits, and novel approaches that bloggers have taken to avoid them. See Mark Thompson (2004). '[Law Offers Internet Publishers Some Guidance on Libel](#)', *Online Journalism Review*, 16 June.

¹¹ While most of the reviews on Amazon are positive, it is worth noting one reader's comments that 'Salam Pax started out well. Then he got commercialized... I'd love to tune back in years from now after he's been forgotten, to see if he returned to writing from the heart.'

¹² Anecdotal evidence, through email communication, suggests that there was relatively little coverage in the US media of WSSD, and the broadest window available to US residents on the event was through online reporting. According to academics Hamilton and Jenner of Louisiana State University: 'The post-Cold War era has seen... greater declines in... the print space and broadcast time devoted to international news (except during crises).' See Hamilton, John Maxwell & Jenner, Eric (2003). '[The Foreign Correspondence](#)', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October.

¹³ It should be noted, however, that of the 20 questions given to him afterwards by the Poynter Institute – to see how informed he had kept, for which he scored 12/20 – almost all of them concern US news. It would be interesting to know how his knowledge of international news differed from reading blogs, to relying on mainstream US media.

In his [Time magazine article](#) of 21 June, Lev Grossman also seems to be missing the point, when he writes: ‘blogs are America thinking out loud’ and ‘If I read only those of my choice, precisely tuned my political biases and you read only yours, we could end up a nation of political solipsists.’ The article examines blogs from a very narrow ‘national’ perspective, missing their revolutionary ability to cross borders.

¹⁴ Hamilton and Jenner suggest that ‘From news services to “blogs,” the Internet has revolutionized the international news market – opening it up to a broader and more active audience. Such technological innovations are rapidly changing the way people produce and consume news, making the traditional model of foreign correspondence obsolete.’

¹⁵ For a detailed description of *Granta* magazine, and its history, see Bennetts, Louise (2003). ‘A Magazine for All Seasons’, [journalism.co.za](#), May.

¹⁶ Marcy Wheeler has also compared blogs to the feuilleton, which is ‘both a section of the newspaper and the journalistic/literary form appearing in that section’. In the nineteenth century, when Napoleon ‘designated... a whole range of political issues that papers couldn’t touch... *Le Journal des Débats* devised a way to continue to critique Napoleon by separating off the bottom third of the page with a thick rule, calling the space under the line the feuilleton, and publishing “non-political” material therein. But the non-political label was just a ruse...’ See Wheeler, Marcy (2004). ‘[Blogging in the Nineteenth Century](#)’, *The Blogging of the President: 2004*, 19 March.

¹⁷ For examples of the New Journalism, see Woolf, T. & Johnson, EW (eds) (1973). *The New Journalism* New York: Harper & Row.

¹⁸ Mark Thompson examined the status of online journalists with regard to press passes in the US, in his article ‘[New Media Often Takes Back Seat to Old Media on Press Credentials](#)’, in the *Online Journalism Review*, in April 2004.

In June 2004 there has been more examination and coverage about this in the US media, since ‘A handful of scribes publishing in a newer medium will join the thousands of newspaper, magazine and broadcast journalists at this summer’s political conventions.’ One of these ‘scribes’ is Markos Moulitsas Zuniga of *Daily Kos*, one of the most popular political blogs. See Anick Jesdanun (2004). ‘[Bloggers to Attend Political Convention](#)’, *Yahoo! News* 20 June.

There are also a few dedicated blogs established specifically to monitor the 2004 US Presidential election. See Minnesota Public Radio’s [The Blogging of the President: 2004](#), and The New York Times’ [Times on the Trail](#). Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Walter Mears, will be coming out of retirement temporarily, to run a blog for *Associated Press* for the duration of the conventions.

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Reflections on Glass

by Andie Miller on Apr 16th, 2012 [Tweet](#) [Like 22](#)

In 1998, Daniel Auster, the son of author Paul Auster, then 20 years old, was sentenced to five years probation in the Manhattan Supreme Court after pleading guilty to stealing \$3000 from the body of murdered drug-dealer, Angel Melendez. The Reuters report stated the facts, but what happened on night of the killing is much more murky and unclear. Melendez was killed by New York ‘club kid’, Michael Alig, who then cut up his body. And though Daniel was never implicated in the murder, he admitted to being in the apartment while it took place.

The movie of Michael Alig’s clubbing years, *Party Monster*, starring Macauley Culkin in the title role has done the festival circuits. But Culkin’s own strange childhood, as the angel-faced star of movies like *Home Alone* (1 and 2) and *Getting Even With Dad* notwithstanding, we can be fairly certain that bears as much resemblance to the character as does Charlize Theron to Aileen Wuornos. Facts are generally far less aesthetically pleasing than fiction.

The ‘better together’ recommendations at Amazon for *Party Monster*, suggest that it should be purchased with *That Was Then, This Is Now*, S. E. Hinton’s 1971 American classic about WASP vs. Hispanic teen gangs, written by and for teenagers. The movie stars Emilio Estevez.

Susan Hinton’s books were my favourites as an adolescent, even as a South African. How much it has to do with a romantic idea of children living without parents, and eating chocolate cake for breakfast I can’t say. But I can still recall the opening line of her first book, *The Outsiders*: ‘When I stepped out into the bright sunlight, from the darkness of the movie house, all I had on my mind was Paul Newman riding home.’ At least I think that’s how it went.

In Paul Auster’s first novella, *City of Glass*, part of the 1985 *New York Trilogy*, his detective, Daniel Quinn, is so confounded by the case he is investigating – of a young man having been imprisoned in a room by his father as a boy, and now afraid that his father is going to kill him – that he seeks out the help of an author called Paul Auster (mistaking him for a detective called Paul Auster).

Whether this is the same Paul Auster who is writing the novel, we are not sure. Though he borrows from the genre of detective fiction, the search in his writing is invariably the search for self. And he says wryly, ‘I grope my way forward in darkness as I’m doing it.’

While Quinn and Auster are in conversation, Auster’s little son Daniel arrives home with his stepmother. Paul introduces the two: “Daniel, this is Daniel.” The boy burst out laughing and said “Everybody’s Daniel!”

Maybe so. Maybe there’s a cautionary tale in this story for us all. After all, how well do we really know anybody? Even those closest to us.

‘Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones,’ says Auggie Wren, the storyteller in Auster’s

screenplay, *Smoke*, who photographs the same spot for 'four thousand straight days in all kinds of weather... And sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear. The earth revolves around the sun, and every day the light from the sun hits the earth at a different angle. Daniel Auster had a small role in the 1995 movie ('book thief'), though he went on to become a photographer by profession.

In Auster's first book, published in 1982, *The Invention of Solitude* – this one not fiction, but a memoir of his father's death (*Portrait of an Invisible Man*), and his meditations on becoming a father to Daniel (*The Book of Memory*) – Auster goes on a journey of discovery of his own father, Samuel, who had been a remote enigma throughout Auster's life. Only in the process of writing this book did he unravel the mystery of what had shaped his father, and made him who he was.

When Samuel was just seven years old, 'on 23 January 1919, precisely sixty years before my father died,' Paul writes, 'his mother shot and killed his father in the kitchen of their house.' She was found not guilty of murder on the grounds of mental instability, but the family (she and five children), spent the rest of their lives in poverty, constantly moving. So when he grew up, he had spent most of his life in denial of and oblivious to what was going on around him.

Auster describes his experience of his father. 'For fifteen years he had lived alone. Doggedly, opaque as if immune to the world. He did not seem to be a man occupying space, but rather a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man. The world bounced off him, shattered against him, at times adhered to him – but it never got through.'

So much so, that once, after Paul and his sister and parents had moved, his father – who regularly took a nap before dinner – mistakenly drove to his old house, and slept surrounded by the new owner's things without even noticing he was in the wrong house. 'Even today,' writes Auster, 'it still makes me laugh. And yet, for all that, I cannot help regarding it as a pathetic story. It is one thing for a man to drive to his old house by mistake, but it is quite another, I think, for him not to notice that anything changed inside it... For as long as he lived, he was somewhere else, between here and there. But never really here. And never really there... And if the mind is unable to respond to the physical evidence, what will it do when confronted with the emotional evidence.'

Auster's father was no more emotionally conscious than he was physically, and Paul describes the meeting between grandfather and grandson. 'Daniel was just two weeks old when he first laid eyes on him. [He] pulled up in his car, saw my wife putting the baby into the carriage for a nap, and walked over to say hello. He poked his head into the carriage for a tenth of a second, straightened up and said hello to her, "A beautiful baby. Good luck with it," and then proceeded to walk into the house.'

While he was writing *The Book of Memory*, and reflecting on having himself become a father, Auster was also translating Stéphane Mallarmé's *A Tomb for Anatole*, about the death of Mallarmé's young son. These fragments that 'aspire to the condition of poetry', Auster describes as 'anguished and moving material for me'.

you can, with your little
hands, drag me
into the grave – you
have the right -
- I
who follow you, I
let myself go -
- but if you
wish, the two
of us, let us make...

an alliance
a hymen, superb
- and the life

remaining in me
I will use for –

Auster, whose body of work revolves around coincidences – ‘the rhythms and rhymes in the world’ and ‘[the music of chance](#)’ – comments on the fact that looking at photographs of Mallarmé’s son Anatole, and his own son Daniel ‘at that age, when they were very small, they could have been twin brothers’.

Of Mallarmé, Auster says that he ‘was able to transform more thoroughly than any other writer, the into the imaginary, and to blur the distinction between the two.’

Auster himself, of course, is a master of the blurring of fact and fiction. As is his wife, novelist Siri Hustvedt. In her most recent novel, *What I Loved* (that took her six years to write), she explores the effects of a troubled child, a pathological liar, on those around him. At once chastised for exploiting stepson by thinly disguising the story of the Angel Melendez murder in the book, and then defended because after all it is fiction, both ends of the spectrum of argument seem to be missing the point. More important are the issues she’s exploring, and the way that she does it. Interviewer [Michael Silverblatt](#) puts his finger on it. It’s ‘the interpenetrations of actual actions and literary ones’ that are so remarkable, he thinks. What he describes as ‘the enjambement of fiction and reality’.

This interpenetration that happens between fact and fiction in style, extends also to what she is exploring in the book. Hustvedt explains: ‘I’m very interested in the idea of our openness, and the fact that people really are created through each other in some important way. It starts in childhood, the intimacy that we have with our parents, maybe most particularly with our mother, or whomever is taking care of us in the beginning. And that intimacy is a kind of interpenetration of character, and that’s how we develop. It goes on in life in friendships as well... Any ordinary conversation between people, there’s that space where the language is taking place... Dialogue is something rather magic. The words are going into us, and coming out of us.’

And this permeability seems to be heightened in art, she says. ‘Art, it seems to me, is probably the place where private life meets the culture in some way. With art we have the strange experience of looking at another person’s inner life and unconscious through the vocabulary of the culture. Whether it’s a written work of art, or a painting, art always borrows from history. It is never created in total isolation, never in a vacuum. You use an artistic vocabulary that you’ve inherited, from art history.’

No doubt this borrowing from history extends to each other’s personal histories, too.

The illusion of separateness and creation in isolation is what Auster was also exploring in *The Invention of Solitude*. The path of the solitary artist alone in a room is an alter ego that he has explored in his fiction, as well. He muses from time to time, with wry alarm, on who he might have become had he not met Hustvedt.

But the echoes in their work extend beyond just thematic and stylistic dimensions. They extend even to the characters in their books. When she is asked about similarities in their writing, and whether she is influenced by Auster’s work, she suggests that ‘partly it is due to a shared world. After all we’ve been together for 21 years. Inevitably there are overlaps.’ At the same time, she reminds us, ‘what people often don’t realise is that he’s done some borrowing from me too’.

In Auster’s book *Leviathan*, one of his characters is a woman called Iris. Many people notice that the name is a nod to Siri “in the mirror”, as she puts it. But not as many are aware that Iris is a character of Siri’s creation from her first book, *The Blindfold*. Auster asked if his main character could marry Hustvedt’s main character, and she ‘thought that was a lovely thing, because Iris was left hanging at the end of the first novel. And I thought it was very nice that she ended up married to Peter Aaron, and doing rather well. Peter Aaron of course shares Auster’s initials, and is a semi-autobiographical character.

But life isn’t as neatly tied up as fiction, and Michael Silverblatt wonders if perhaps our culture is encouraging its children to become pathological in order to imitate art. ‘When you talk about diseases generated by the culture, one of these diseases it seems to me has become the interest in the extreme

case, the lurid case, the case that verges on poetry.' Is pathology then the culture's self-fulfilled prophecy?

Hustvedt takes a more practical view. 'I think that the human organism requires certain things in order to do very well,' she says. 'And it seems that some kind of consistent early nurture is really important. And I think that is the thing that to a large degree determines human health. At the same time, it's mysterious. If you read different case studies, you will not be able to find an honest psychiatrist who will tell you that you can predict. You can put two cases side by side, two children who have had very tough childhoods, and they will grow up to be two quite different people. What the factors are remains mysterious. Obviously personal history is very important, one's personal emotional history. But also one's genetic make-up. You know your nerves, the way you're strung. All of this goes together to make a human being.'

Auster's first wife and Daniel's mother, writer and academic Lydia Davis, is quiet on the subject. After her divorce from Auster, Daniel moved between her and his father, and one can't help wondering about her thoughts of her child.

Writer Amy Fusselman says of her: 'Lydia Davis is ferocious. When I attended her reading in NYC recently, and heard her read the piece about the old dictionary and her son, I was struck again by how that piece is one of the most fearless bits of writing I've ever read. It was all the more powerful to hear her read it in her own, soft voice.'

In the piece to which she refers, a short story called *The Old Dictionary*, from Davis's collection *San Johnson is Indignant* (2001), 'a scholar measures her questionable child-rearing against how well she cares for a rare, antique book, and achieves a realization about how she could better treat her young son'.

Davis specialises in short-short stories (sometimes referred to as 'flash fiction'). In conversation with her, [Michael Silverblatt](#) observes, 'I sense in your work an almost inhuman perfectionism.' What is that she is most sensitive to in her writing, he asks? 'Well, taking away excess, the sentence that's too long or many. Dullness. Something that's too commonplace.' She recalls learning to read. 'I loved learning words "look" and "see": "Run, Jane, run. See Jane run."' It was so clear and easy and unconfusing and neat.'

She cites [Grace Paley](#) as an example of the 'compression' that she admires. But she adds that, unlike Paley, she struggles to write slang. 'I can't deal easily with casual writing. I wrote a story in slang, but to do it I had to go to a slang dictionary.' She has a sense of humour about herself.

When she reads the story in question, *The Meeting*, aloud, it reflects a similar sense of humour to Paley's, too. Though she cites [Russell Edson](#) as one of her earliest influences. 'His subjects were from some deep psychic space that most of us don't want to touch. Family stuff. Crude, difficult family stuff.'

Her story *In A House Besieged* (in full):

'In a house besieged lived a man and a woman. From where they cowered in the kitchen the man and woman heard small explosions. "The wind," said the woman. "Hunters," said the man. "The rain," said the woman. "The army," said the man. The woman wanted to go home, but she was already home, there in the middle of the country in a house besieged.'

And from *The Professor*, 'all I wanted to do was go out into the middle of the desert, as far away as possible from everything I had known all my life, and from the university where I was teaching and the towns and the city near it with all the intelligent people who lived and worked in them, writing down their ideas in notebooks and on computers in their offices and their studies at home and taking notes from difficult books. I wanted to leave all this and go out into the middle of the desert and run a motorcycle by myself with a little boy, and have a worn-out cowboy come along, a worn-out middle-aged alcoholic if necessary, and marry him. I thought I knew of a little boy I could take with me... The fact that if an alcoholic cowboy came into my life in any important way I would probably criticize him to death for his drinking until he walked out on me.'

She characterises her writing as ‘a philosophical investigation of the relationship between imagination and reality, as well as an exploration of one’s perceptions of one’s identity and the subjective nature of the truth’.

Davis went into the family profession, as both her parents were writers, though ‘it wasn’t an entirely happy fate,’ she says. Music was her first love. But what does her son Daniel feel about being surrounded by literary celebrity?

Photographer Ned Schenck of *Pavement Studios* recalls introducing himself to ‘a cool tattooed kid on Avenue B after taking his portrait... “By the way, my name’s Ned.”

The kid replies “Hi, I’m Daniel Auster.”

My response, “That’s interesting, I’m reading a book by Paul Auster; he’s one of my favorite authors.”

Daniel grins and says “Yeah, I know him; that’s my dad.” A few days later I read in *The Village Voice* that Daniel would be testifying as a witness in the Peter Gattien ecstasy drug ring trial, and that he was apparently the teenage kid who was passed out in the apartment during the infamous *Disco Blood* clubland murder of Angel Melendez by Michael Alig.’

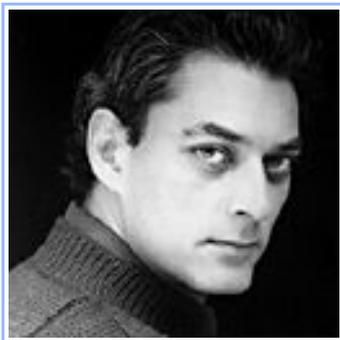
The picture accompanying the *Village Voice* review of Davis’s *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant*, shows a beautiful woman, with big eyes, looking directly into the camera. Her expression is hard to read.

The photo is by Daniel Auster.

Ned Schenck’s picture of Daniel reveals a Byronesque looking boy.

A softer version of the young Paul Auster in the pictures on the covers of his early books.

In 1979, Auster concluded his *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, of his father, with these words:



‘Past two in the morning. An overflowing ashtray, an empty coffee cup, and the cold of early spring. The image of Daniel now, as he lies upstairs in his crib asleep. To end with this.

‘To wonder what he will make of these pages when he is old enough to read them.

‘And the image of his sweet and ferocious little body, as he lies upstairs in his crib asleep. To end with this.’

It was these words that touched me and made me curious to investigate what had become of this little boy. Now I am filled with a profound sense of sadness.

In Hustvedt’s book, *What I Loved*, the father of the troubled boy dies of a broken heart. But this is fiction. Auster is as productive as ever, still averaging a book every eighteen months. Of his latest book, *Oracle Night*, *Guardian* critic Sean O’Hagan says that its ‘noir shadings... and shockingly violent

interludes... are indicative of a late style that is both darker than the Auster of old, and somehow more life affirming. They speak of endurance, survival, reinvention; the trajectory that one does not give up after follows loss, attends to the grieving process.'

'Every life is inexplicable,' says Auster's narrator in *The Locked Room*, the final novella in *The New York Trilogy*. 'No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details given, the essential thing resists telling... We all want to be told stories... We imagine the real story inside the words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person in the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception.'

Recently Auster has had little to say publicly about his son. He says only that he 'is currently finding himself – ask me again in a couple of years.'

This essay first appeared in Eclectica Magazine, October 2005.

Cats: South Africa

Tags: A Tomb for Anatole, Andie Miller, City of Glass, Daniel Auster, Grace Paley, KCRW Bookworm, Leviathan, Lydia Davis, Michael Silverblatt, Oracle Night, Party Monster, Paul Auster, Russell Edson, Samuel Johnson is Indignant, SE Hinton, Siri Hustvedt, Smoke, South Africa, Stéphane Mallarmé, That Was Then This Is Now, The Blindfold, The Invention of Solitude, The Locked Room, The Music of Chance, The New York Trilogy, The Outsider, What I Loved

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Half a Continent, Step by Step

by Andie Miller on Apr 5th, 2012 [Tweet](#) [Like 6](#)

On the 6th of April 1994 the genocide in Rwanda began. Three weeks later the world's attention turned elsewhere, to the 'miracle' happening in South Africa, with its first democratic election, but over a period of three months close to a million people were killed.

Innocent was visiting his aunt in Kigali on that day. He was thirteen years old at the time. He never returned home. They hid in the passage of her house for over a month before fleeing in their car. Eventually there was no space to drive, and his long walk began.

'I walked with my aunt for about a week, there were thousands of people walking, and then in the chaos I got lost and I was on my own, just walking with everybody, millions of people who were trying to leave the country. At one stage you walk in a group of so many people there is no space to walk. Everyone is pushing one another. Then people get tired and they just sit. And others get sick. So the crowd becomes smaller and smaller.'

Along the road he met a school friend who was also lost, and together they walked approximately two hundred kilometres from Kigali to Cyangugu on the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaïre), where they stayed with his friend's aunt and uncle for eight months.

When the fighting stopped he decided to return to Kigali to look for his family, but a trader from DR Congo brought news that his mother was across the border in a refugee camp in Bukavu. He crossed the border by pretending to be the trader's son and was reunited with his mother and two of his brothers. Then he learned that his father had been killed on the first day of the genocide, and three of his six

siblings were missing.

'We lived about two years in the camps, and then we were forced to move again. And then there was nowhere to run to.' In 1996 the revolution to remove dictator Mobutu Sésé Seko from power, which had enjoyed since Patrice Lumumba's assassination three decades earlier, began in Zaïre. Kabila's rebel army attacked the camps, and about thirty-seven thousand refugees fled into the forests. 'So people who were walking away from the war in Rwanda, in the process they were getting killed in the DRC.'

'Some people had cars, but a large portion of DRC is jungle, and the roads are not maintained, there's nothing, so those people who are driving are usually driving 4x4s. And because there are so many rivers, most people just drive up to that point and then leave their cars and walk. Whether you walk or you run, you just try to get as far away as possible.'

At fifteen his year-long mostly barefoot walk across the DRC began. 'From the border of Rwanda, from Lake Kivu in DRC, we walked to reach the border of Angola. It's maybe four thousand kilometres. The walk was sort of in a linear way, just walking in one line, following the people in front of you.' The images of refugees that we see on the news. 'Because left or right it's just the jungle, and if you get lost in there it's going to be very difficult to get back. So people stick together.'

'The local guys, they've got homes in the jungle, they know short cuts to special places where they do their farming. And then they sell their products in the centres, and those centres are a distance away from one another. So you walk until you reach a commercial centre, if you've got money you've got food. If you don't have money you trade in something, shoes or clothes, a watch. Then that will be your provision for a week. Then you walk you walk you walk... Sometimes you walk for two weeks there is no centre, the next centre is five hundred kilometres away. And you'll know because you'll meet guys who are coming from there, who went to sell their food there. You ask them, "Where is the next centre?" They tell you, "You're going to reach there by Monday." That's if you're walking fifty kilometres every day. You trade until you have nothing left to trade. By the time you've walked maybe three months you've got nothing.'

'The only way to do it is just to survive the next step. If the troops find you they will kill you. So you have to walk. When we started walking it was a huge number of refugees from the camps. Walking, scattering in the bushes. People used to walk till their feet were so big. I saw women with feet as big as...,' he demonstrates the width of a soccer ball. 'Because of the nutrition, because people were eating a lot of bad meat in the jungle, baboons, rats... People got very sick. Even from fresh meat, like pork maybe it's pigs that were sick, people died. So basically from that time I didn't eat meat, for five years. Just vegetables and fruits, and drink water.'

The water too could make you sick. 'And sometimes we couldn't find water to drink. I saw people drinking water that was like mud.' A bitter irony that some would survive the rebel soldiers and be killed by the water.

And then there were the rivers. 'If you come to a river and you can't cross it, then you have to stop. The motivating factor was just to get as far away as you can.' This was how he was separated from his mother. 'When we arrived at the Congo River she had to walk back, she couldn't swim. I saw many people drowning. We could swim, but because the river was big there were only a few guys who could swim straight across. It took about two hours to cross.'

'By the time we reached the border of Angola we were not more than fifty. When Kabila took power in DRC we were at the border of Angola. I got two kilometres from the border. Some people tried to go into Angola but they couldn't because there was still a war there. So people walked to the point where they couldn't walk any more. And then you decide that you're going to lie in the street. Wait for UN or somebody to assist you.'

I find it hard to comprehend walking from one war, through another war, and into another. But the borders become almost irrelevant as the wars bleed into each other. Conflict in the DRC was sparked

by the influx of Rwandan refugees. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, which had liberated Rwanda from genocide, assisted Laurent Kabila to oust Mobutu, who was accommodating many of the perpetrators of the genocide in the refugee camps, living side by side with survivors – the First Congo War. After relations between Kabila and the RPF soured, they supported his overthrow, fuelling the Second Congo War.

‘By the time we reached that point, on the border of Angola,’ says Innocent, ‘I was the youngest, the smallest. It wasn’t safe for us to go over the border because Savimbi,’ the rebel leader, ‘his men thought that the refugees were helping the Angolan government. There were lots of misconceptions. And then when we reached that point – me and two of my close friends, we met in the refugee camp, we walked together, then we separated, then we met again – we decided that we’re just going to integrate into the community in Tshikapa. It’s one of the richest places in the DRC, with lots of diamonds. And we stayed there for a year.

‘When we arrived there, it’s like you’ve got a mark. A refugee was a person who’s known to be... He looks different, he’s dirty, he’s got thick hair, he doesn’t have shoes, he steals... But that perception changed within a few months.’

Innocent remembers his first job. Unlike his friends, who were bigger and started earning their living producing charcoal, ‘My first job was to sell cold water. That place is very hot. First you have to fetch the water from somewhere far, between a six- and ten-kilometre walk. This twenty-litre basin, you carry that to the village. When you get there you have to start looking for a fridge where you can put it for a while. Then you put the water in small plastic bags, one cup. Then you put the plastic bags in the basin and you walk through the village with the basin shouting *Mayi ya malili*, cold water. You go from A to Z, your customers are big guys who are standing on the street. You sell it for about fifty cents. And you do that for three months.’

He often speaks in the second person, as though remembering another time, another life, another person.

‘When Kabila took over in 1997, he had been assisted by many of the troops from Rwanda, then he said all the troops must go back to their countries, and that fuelled the conflict again. Rwanda became the enemy of DRC, and people from Rwanda were considered enemies. And even though in that village people knew we were fleeing from the war, and by that time we could speak the local languages fluently, we just had to make the decision that we have to leave DRC. By that time we had a little bit of money, and we couldn’t go through Angola, so we had to go to Zambia, which was a long distance. I took a train. It took about two months.

‘Then I met a guy from DRC in Zambia and he was broke, not a cent, and he said, “You know, I’ve got a brother in South Africa, but I can’t get to him, I don’t even have money to give him a call.” So I said to this guy, “You know what, I’ve got a little bit left, let’s go.” By the time we got to Joburg I didn’t have one cent left. But this guy took me to his brother, a businessman in Alberton. We stayed there for about three weeks. And then I ended up in Ponte. I went to church and met some guys from Rwanda and I said, “There’s this guy, maybe go speak to him”, and I went there, and he gave me accommodation for about seven months. He had his wife and his kids, and he was helping a lot of people.’ Ponte City, considered by many natives to be a druglords’ haven, is also the first hope for thousands of displaced Africans arriving in Joburg.

Later, Innocent heard about Mercy House, a home for refugees started by Diana Beamish in 1996, not funded by any particular organisation but by a number of ‘church persons’ and groups. ‘I met some other refugees and one guy recommended we should go there. “Teacher Di” is quite well known not only amongst the refugees.’

Diana recalls what prompted her to start Mercy House. ‘I was watching the footage of the genocide on TV and I was absolutely horrified, and I wanted to do something. I wanted to adopt a baby but that turned out to be impossible. In October 1994 a group of refugees arrived and I traced them to a disused mine. They had nowhere to go. I went there regularly, Woolworths gave me food for them.

There were no windows, and rats were crawling over them where they slept. It was terrible.

‘Then I went to the Comboni Fathers,’ a Catholic missionary organisation, ‘and they helped as much as they could, but their resources were limited. So I went to every organisation I could think of, and one would help, not even the Red Cross, so eventually my aunt and I bought the house in Bez Valle. Though Diana is Catholic, and most of the donations that keep Mercy House running are from the Catholic community, the home is nondenominational and takes in any refugee child who is in need.’ ‘We simply take in orphans from the wars in Africa,’ she says. ‘We started with five Muslims and one Christian.’

Innocent considers himself nondenominational. ‘I go to any church,’ he says. ‘You don’t gain anything by limiting who you can be friends with.’

I am astounded, listening to his near-perfect English, to discover that he could not speak the language at all when he arrived here a decade ago. He puts it down to his primary education. ‘At primary school I was educated in my mother tongue. If you need to learn French, English, you can do that from your first year of high school, but if you learn to think first in your mother tongue, to develop your cognitive skills, then learning another language is not a problem.’

Starting off at Task Academy, he moved to Highlands North Boys High, and finally to Sandringham High School because he wanted to do extra maths. Getting there was not easy. ‘My first year at Sandringham was tough,’ he says. ‘I had to integrate, get involved in sport.’ He did cross-country running. ‘There were a lot of misconceptions about the kids coming from Highlands North – “they are rough, they smoke drugs, they steal”. So I had to change all that.’ At the age of twenty-two he matriculated with distinction, which earned him a scholarship for his first year at Wits University.

Now a big, tall man who works as an electrical engineer for a company in Pretoria, one of whose major clients is Eskom, South Africa’s precarious electricity supplier, he reflects on living in South Africa as a ‘foreigner’. He has driven from Pretoria to meet me, still using an international driver’s licence, as getting a South African licence has proved to be hard. ‘The South African licensing department is full of dramas,’ he says. ‘The last time I went to apply for a licence they said that I couldn’t because I must produce a South African ID. So I went to get a driver’s licence in DRC. I had to start working, so I had to drive.’

‘These xenophobic attacks,’ he says, ‘it shocked everybody. But most people actually saw it coming. The headlines were there, but people didn’t pay attention. I think the fact that Zimbabwe went so badly that there are so many Zimbabweans coming into the country, I think that’s what triggered it. Because Zimbabweans are probably amongst the best-educated Africans. So these guys they just come, go into the townships, start a business, and before you know it he’s bought himself a house.’

‘The thing that people fail to understand... I mean, they say that people are taking jobs from the local people. But which jobs? Speaking from experience, you’re not going to get a decent job if you don’t have a South African ID. You’re not going to be promoted. The moment you don’t have that you are excluded. If you do, it’s an exception.’

‘The company that I’m working for, we are so overworked. They take on projects, but those projects are going to take so much time because there aren’t graduates who have the skills available to employ.’ As increasing numbers of South Africans are choosing to do business degrees, the science graduates are being left behind.

‘And many immigrants who can contribute to the country are not being given the chance, so they have to find a way of surviving. They have to start a business, and if the business doesn’t survive they go into crime.’ What he’s pointing to is that skilled people are often forced to remain in the informal sector, competing for jobs with poor South Africans or deviating into criminal activity. So, while violence erupted among the poor on the ground, government and its immigration policies play a significant part in fuelling the conflict.

‘My feeling is, I’m not a refugee any more. I said to myself, when I graduate I can no longer be

considered a refugee. I'd love to stay in this country and contribute as much as I can. I'm not the type of person who says there's crime and what-what – I mean, crime is everywhere. You can't run.' He muses, though, on the irony of potentially becoming a statistic on a South African street. 'I've got friends who have been hijacked. I've got a friend who was walking in Yeoville, he got shot. The bullet went into his shoulder, missed his heart by about an inch. And that guy has survived bombs. They've gone through all that, and someone comes in Joburg and stabs you.'

'My car was stolen last year, my first car. I was going to be in it about a minute later. I was walking towards it as the guys were driving off. I was mugged when I was a student, at knifepoint in Braamfontein.' A quick transaction, he says: "'Where's your phone?' 'Here.'" You don't resist someone who's got a knife or a gun. If they want something, you just give it to them.'

But if anything forces him to move on, he says, it will be the ongoing battle to become a recognised citizen of the country, 'because I'm paying tax just like everybody else, and I'm working hard, and I can't benefit from the economy that I'm helping to build.'

'You can live in this country for twenty years and not be allowed to become a citizen. That guy who gave me accommodation in Ponte, he's been here for sixteen years, he works as a fitter and turner, excellent at that job, and he doesn't yet have permanent residence. And because he still has refugee papers his boss is not going to promote him. He can't make him a manager or anything like that.' It's a frustrating subject. He becomes silent.

I imagine, after all the thousands of miles that he's walked, he wouldn't miss it now that he's driving. But he says he does. 'For the first two years when I got to South Africa I used to walk a lot. From Ponte and then from Mercy House. I know town very well. For me walking is essential. You can't appreciate the car you're driving unless you've walked. You're not going to understand...

'I'm in the habit, if I'm driving from Mpumalanga for work and I see someone who's walking, I will be very careful, but if I know I'm not in any danger I will stop and give them a lift. Because I know, if someone's been walking for hours and nobody's stopping because they're scared this guy is a criminal, and the guy's just trying to get to work on time, I know what it's like, because I've been there.'

'When I was doing vac work at varsity, we were doing some work in Vereeniging, at the power station. I used to knock off at four, but one day I finished at two, so I thought, let me just go, otherwise I've got to wait for two hours for these other guys to finish. So I started hitch-hiking. From that power station to the next town you walk about five hours. I walked for about two hours, nobody would stop, and then all of a sudden somebody stopped. And I couldn't believe it was a lady driving alone. This experience is something I will never forget. When you live in South Africa, it's crime, and you're just walking, and it's a lady by herself who stops.'

'We were talking and she said she believes in helping out, and she thought I was coming from work. I had my hat. But I had been walking for long hours and people wouldn't stop.'

I suppose it is moments like these that restore one's faith in humanity. And yet, Innocent says, it's something he has never really doubted. 'Me, I've seen kindness everywhere I've been – from Rwanda, DRC, Zambia, South Africa. The guy who helped us get visas to Zambia, his life was in danger. He took a risk to help us. So I saw kindness all the way.'

What has surprised him more, he says, is his own survival instinct. Thinking of the war, he says: 'You walk past a lady, her husband has left her, she can't walk and some of her kids are missing, she's crying, and you look at your own life, and you can hear the bombs, and you get to a point where your emotions just run dry, you don't feel anything. Even if you're strong and you can help, you don't because your own life is at risk, so you just leave her.'

'Many people lost their kids in the jungle. At some stage you're walking, and the fighting is so close that you just have to leave the road and go and hide in the bush in the hope that once everything is calm you can come back and start walking again.'

Miraculously, Innocent's mother made it back to Rwanda, and he has been back to see her. 'I was amazed. I couldn't imagine how she made it back.'

Excerpted from Slow Motion: stories about walking (Jacana, 2010).

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Andie Miller, Bukavu refugee camp, Democratic Republic of Congo, Diana Beamish, DRC, Easter, First Congo War, Mercy House, refugee, Rwanda, Rwandan Genocide, Second Congo War, Slow Motion, South Africa, stories about walking

Quick URL

In the Footsteps of Bosman and Dickens, via Hillbrow

by Andie Miller on Feb 7th, 2012

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On the 200th birthday of Charles Dickens, I'm thinking of Phaswane Mpe, who loved him so.

“

Kaffirs? (said Oom Schalk Lourens). Yes, I know them. And they're all the same. I fear the Almighty, and respect his works, but I could never understand why he made the Kaffir and the rinderpest. The Hottentot is a little bit better. The Hottentot will only steal the biltong hanging out on the line to dry. He won't steal the line as well. That is where the Kaffir is different. Still, sometimes you come across a good kaffir, who is faithful and upright and a true Christian and who doesn't let the wild dogs catch the sheep. I always think it isn't right to kill that kind of kaffir.

This is Phaswane Mpe, author of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, quoting from memory the beginning of 'Makapan's Caves', the first Herman Charles Bosman story he read as a teenager and one that remains a favourite. I am a little shocked. I can hardly bring myself to say the K-word out loud, let alone repeat it over and over, and I was never at the receiving end of apartheid's brutality.

'I don't think words in themselves are bad,' says Phaswane. 'I'm more interested in how those words get used. We need to distinguish between insults and ironies.'

I have a feeling Phaswane would like Sixties American comedian Lenny Bruce, who said: 'Satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers will allow you to satirise it.'

For the majority of South Africans, though, there has not been enough time, and just a few years ago a schoolteacher was dismissed when parents accused him of setting a 'racist' exam paper based on Bosman's story 'Unto Dust'.

But Phaswane is able to laugh. He laughs a lot.

‘I think it may have something to do with my experience of apartheid,’ he says. ‘I didn’t experience the same way, for example, that people in Soweto experienced it. I was living in a rural village, Gamoepo, about fifty kilometres to the southeast of Pietersburg, in the Northern Province. And most of the terrible things I heard on the radio rather than actually coming into direct contact with them. Apart from Bantu education, I experienced it indirectly. Part of what that did for me, I think, is that I never developed bitterness. I just thought about it as something that we needed to do away with, and move on.’

A teacher who introduced Phaswane to Bosman has been one of the most positive influences in his life. She is the Catholic nun, Sister Mary Anne Tobin, to whom *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is dedicated.

‘Our school library wasn’t very well stocked, so my introduction to literature was really through Enid Blyton, particularly the *Famous Five* series. I read almost everything in that series. I liked George, and Timmy the dog. I also had a dog that I was very close to. I could relate to the characters on an emotional level.

‘Then I read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and I found it a great book. I keep on going back to it. I loved the magical nature of the characters, which spoke to my enjoyment of folk tales and, on another level, its subversive humour. Mary Anne moved me away from Enid Blyton when she introduced me to Herman Charles Bosman. And from there I moved on to Charles Dickens.’

It was the opening passage of *Great Expectations* that captured his imagination: ‘My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.’

‘I don’t know exactly what it was,’ says Phaswane. ‘I suppose part of it is just the confidence of the child. Knowing what he cannot do, but being able to improvise and feeling that he’s doing it well. Achieving great success at something that seems so small.’

In 1988, at the age of seventeen, during the school holidays Phaswane visited Johannesburg for the first time. ‘I never got to Hillbrow that year. There were bomb scares in town, and my brother and cousin wouldn’t hear of me going there. So it was a very dull three weeks I spent in Highlands North where I was staying with my brother. I was very bored. There wasn’t much that was exciting in the street. People were very quiet, and I’m not a great fan of shopping centres. I didn’t know at the time that I could use the library.’

The following year Phaswane moved to Joburg to attend Wits University, and though *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is not autobiographical, the walk the novel’s hero Refentše makes – from Vickers Place to the campus in Braamfontein – is the walk Phaswane made daily as an undergraduate when he lived in Hillbrow. These days he lives in Braamfontein, and doesn’t have far to go to get to campus while he does his doctorate, but he is still committed to walking. ‘I think I’m a great walker partly because I love to walk; there was just no other way out. And so walking became both a necessity and a pastime. If there’s a distance that I can walk I prefer to walk. I want to see the world around me. It’s how I find stories,’ he says.

‘The thing that strikes me about walking is that, no matter how often you travel one route, you always observe something new every time. It might be a very small detail, which at the time perhaps doesn’t matter. After a couple of days, a couple of weeks, months, perhaps even years, it just comes back to you, and during the course of time it has become so significant, without you making an effort to make it significant.

‘At one time on my walks through Hillbrow there was something like a dog kennel outside the city shelter. And then they moved it. Now that corner of Kotze and Hospital Streets is sort of changed for me. When something changes, that’s been part of your consciousness, it’s as though you’re walking a slightly different route, now that the familiar landmark is no longer there.

‘I’m very bad with dates. If I write something, I tell a story. As long as I know I got the sequence right, I don’t care very much about the exact time. I want to concentrate more on the meaning of place for me.

I tend to use incidents and events to locate myself in terms of time. You never know at what point an event or an incident will become significant in your own life. And it's mostly only in hindsight – with the exception of the things you have planned for, and if you don't achieve them, they become significant because of your failure!' he laughs as an afterthought.

'But place, of course, has a lot to do, not just with the landmarks but with the people who are in the place. And your experience of meeting those people. The social interaction. Your experience of those interactions. When I began writing the book I initially thought I was just doing a portrait of Hillbrow. And I realised as I started working on the map that actually I can't have a map with no one to move around in it. That's how I ended up putting Refentše into the map.'

Refentše was a character from Phaswane's earlier short stories. In one of them, 'Occasion for Brooding', Refentše had committed suicide, so Phaswane decided to 'resurrect' him by having the book's narrator in dialogue with the deceased. His use of the word resurrect and his friendship with Sister Mary Anne make me wonder if he's religious.

'There are things about Christianity I don't agree with,' he says. 'One of my biggest problems is the idea of original sin. I just can't accept that I'm born a sinner, so I'm not Christian. I became aware; I was growing up that increasingly I was going to church because I wanted to meet my friends there, I realised I could make arrangements to meet them after church. And then at some point I decided there's no God, but I've sort of changed my mind. Now I'm not sure. Either way it doesn't actually bother me. I believe in the power of the ancestors. I subscribe to elements of Christianity and elements of traditional belief; I think they both have their own limitations. Maybe I'm just an opportunist,' he laughs. 'I like the Bible as a collection of stories, though. I think it's great.'

'In one of his essays, on why black South Africans shouldn't really care about being called 'Kaffir', Bosman points out that the word actually means unbeliever; it was only at a later stage that it began to accumulate these political meanings, so we should be thankful for not being associated with conservative Christianity.'

'I think what I particularly like about Bosman is the way he captures the complexity of the rural mentality. The prejudices and gems of wisdom.' This mentality, that feeds so much on second- and third-hand stories, often mythology, is something Phaswane explores at length in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

When I ask him how he deals with issues of safety while walking in the inner city, he reminds me that like Refentše, he had been warned often about the dangers before he left home, and while Hillbrow is not quite the menacing monster he'd been told to expect, he too has had his share of violent experiences. 'I've had several,' he says, as though this is completely normal. And then proceeds to list a number of incidents, all cellphone-related.

There's a line in *Skin Deep*, a recent play at the Market Theatre, where one of the young women asks a potential lover if he has the three Cs: a car, a cellphone, and a credit card. This is what will make him successful in her eyes. Though probably, to muggers, cash is still king.

'When they took my first cellphone, they had guns,' Phaswane continues. 'That was in the daylight. The second time they had knives. But my third cellphone was quite an interesting case. I actually felt I wasn't safe, so I decided to catch a cab. The driver called someone over, and I thought he was just saying goodbye to his friend. I had the door open, and was about to get in when this guy, the taxi driver's friend, took out a knife and robbed me and the driver just kept quiet. In the end I didn't get into the car, I went back to drink where I'd left my friends at my drinking hole.'

'If I'm carrying a lot of money, I'll carry it in a book. For some reason criminals don't like books,' he laughs. 'There was one day, I had just come back from Germany, where I received a stipend, so I ended up not having to use my own money. I had about a thousand euros. I carried it inside *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, which I was reading at the time, and walked quite safely to deposit it in the bank.'

If not conventionally religious, he is fatalistic. 'I walk through Hillbrow at any time of the day or night he says. 'If it's your turn, it's your turn.' Perhaps this is influenced by coming from a rural area, where nature can be more of a threat than one's fellow man. One of the biggest dangers in the wide open space, while walking, is lightning. 'Shortly after I wrote my first short story, 'Brooding Clouds', a story about witchcraft and lightning,' he says, 'my mother got struck by lightning. She wasn't fatally injured but nevertheless I started feeling guilty, and I put the story in my briefcase for a while before it was published.'

On the question of owning a car, Phaswane says he has no need. 'I've been teaching at the university so I don't have far to travel. And if I need to travel a long distance for any reason I catch a cab. But when I do travel long distances, it's usually to far off places, where I use a plane.'

In 1997 he spent nine months in Oxford doing a diploma in publishing studies. He didn't realise that this was the home of Lewis Carroll, author of the *Alice in Wonderland* that he so loved, but a friend, knowing his love of Dickens, invited him to visit London for a few days. 'I went to see the Old Curiosity Shop. I didn't recognise anything in London from Dickens's work, not in a physical sense anyway, but I did have some sort of emotional response, which worked wonders for me, because I didn't actually like London. It's too congested and too busy for my liking. Hillbrow is congested,' he adds, 'but there's a lot of social life in Hillbrow. I didn't feel that in London. There's a lot of busyness, but...', he trails off, hinting at a loneliness in the London crowd that is very different from Africa.

Bosman once related a story of meeting a South African on a bench in Hyde Park who 'told me the funniest Afrikaans story I have ever heard. It was about a predikant and the district drunkard. Afterwards, I thought much about the man. I wondered how long he had been there, sitting on that park bench, in childlike faith that some day a stranger would come past who would know about the veld and who would listen to his story.' And then he continued in his usual irreverent fashion: 'It's queer how London always seems to lead the world in art and literature ... Here I have to come all the way to London, to Hyde Park, to hear the world's best Afrikaans story.'

Bosman's years abroad, it is said, 'seemed to offer less of the stimulus of a fresh environment than re-affirmation of love for his old one'. Though Phaswane has travelled a fair amount, I get the impression the same may be true for him.

Back home, Phaswane realises that he may at some point be forced to learn to drive. 'I've not had a strong motivation to do it. But I may one day end up working far from Braamfontein, and then it will become unavoidable. Public transport in South Africa, if you are under time constraints,' he concedes 'can be a problem.'

'The only people who have responded with a sense of surprise when I tell them I don't drive have been my students. 'We thought you were successful,' they say. But from very early on I defined success in my own terms, by the kind of things I *do*, rather than what I don't do. That's another thing I got from Mary Anne. If I had followed what others have told me constitutes success, I'd probably have stopped teaching much earlier and done something that made a lot more money.'

Commenting on his doctoral thesis, on representations of sexuality in post-apartheid literature, he says: 'I particularly like K Sello Duiker's novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, because it deals with issues of black homosexuality, black identity and masculinity, but he does it in a way that takes homosexuality for granted, in a context where many people argue that homosexuality is a white man's disease. I like the honesty with which he treats the issues.'

Throughout our conversation, his 2-year-old daughter Reneilwe has been peacefully sleeping in his lap. She stirs, and our attention is brought back to the room; to the sun fading outside his office window. It is time to get the little girl home. He gathers her things together, picks up his cellphone, prepares for their walk, ready for any stories they might encounter on the way.

This conversation took place on 3 November 2004. Excerpted from Slow Motion: stories about walking

(Jacana, 2010).

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Andie Miller, Charles Dickens, Herman Charles Bosman, Hillbrow, Lenny Bruce, Phaswane Mpe, Slow Mo South Africa, stories about walking, Welcome to Our Hillbrow

Quick URL

Keeping the conversation alive

by Andie Miller on Jan 30th, 2012 [Tweet](#) [Like 5](#)

As Chile was walloping Switzerland, fans in Mary Fitzgerald Square were oblivious to the generator that kicked in when Eskom workers left the rest of the Newtown Cultural Precinct in the dark. I wondered what Fitzgerald, said to have been the first female trade unionist in South Africa, would have made of this.

It didn't faze June Josephs and her team at Xarra Books. They were determined to go ahead with the event they had planned for the evening. A dozen or so of us gathered at the front of the shop, and C Abani, comfortable with moving between worlds, read his poetry by candlelight and prose by iPad. When June asked him what he thought the iPad meant for the future of bookshops, he was unsentimental. He said he recognised the value of books as artefacts, but in the past year he'd sold more e-copies of his novel *Graceland* than he'd sold paper copies in previous years.

Then he joked about an experiment some writers performed in the US, going into bookshops and asking: "Do you have *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius?*" (the Dave Eggers memoir). And the response they often got: "Which one?" – illustrating how little the average bookseller in the chains these days knows about their product. Towards the end of the reading, he looked up and said: "We filled up." Looking back, I saw there was now only standing room available. The absence of electric light hadn't deterred poetry fans.

Over a glass of wine I met Zakhele Dumas, who told me about his new venture, Isipho Books – "the you deserve" – selling books "out of the boot of my car". Actually he was being modest. His service involves sourcing and delivering books to busy readers; particularly (though not exclusively) book African languages. He had some interesting ideas about marketing and positioning, and why he thought Exclusive Books in Maponya Mall in Soweto failed. As we chatted, Zukiswa Wanner came over and handed back a couple of signed copies of her books for one of his clients. This is also part of his service.

I recalled two decades ago when I began reading, long before I thought of writing, how Doron Lock – the owner of Yeoville Books at 28 Rockey Street, immortalised by Ivan Vladislavi in his short story *The Book Lover* – introduced me to books I didn't know I was looking for. Every now and then I'd receive a phone call, and he'd say: "I've got something in I think you might like." And I'd take a walk down the street to have a look.

Similarly with Corina van der Spoel on my first visit to Boekehuis. I'd gone to pick up something I'd ordered, and based on that she took me over to a shelf: "I think this might interest you," she said. I'd been told that Ann Donald at Kalk Bay Books and Mervyn Sloman at the Book Lounge in Cape Town have similar relationships with readers.

When I need anything from the African history section at Exclusive Books in the Rosebank Mall,

dreadlocked TK is bound to be able to help. And in the process I'm likely to learn what he thinks about the ANC Youth League's latest antics, or an upcoming election. I leave with more than a book.

As Spain was gearing up to knock Honduras out on the giant screen in the Newtown Precinct, the last stragglers left Xarra's. The square was closed off to traffic, and we had a five-minute walk up to the park. On the way, I told Akin Omotoso how sad I was that his wonderful movie *Jozi* only lasted on circuit for a week. He, too, was pragmatic. "I think the time will come when all movies go straight to DVD," he said. "Basically, I want people to see my movies." And I felt profoundly depressed by the idea of no more laughter shared with strangers; that all our cultural experiences might become private or virtual.

Reading and writing are solitary activities, but it's the conversations and experiences around the books that keep us going in seclusion; and what gets me up out of my chair, travelling across the city to a bookshop. Without that, I may as well resort to the efficient delivery of Kalahari and Loot to my door.

This article first appeared on LitNet, 13 July 2010.

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Akin Omotoso, Andie Miller, Ann Donald, Boekehuis, Chris Abani, Corina van der Spoel, Dave Eggers, Dor Locketz, Ivan Vladislavi, Jozi, June Josephs, Kalahari, Kalk Bay Books, Loot, Mervyn Sloman, Newtown Cultural Precinct, South Africa, The Book Lounge, The Book Lover, Xarra Books, Yeoville Books, Zakhele Dumas, Zukiswa Wanner

Quick URL

Review of *Slow Motion: stories about walking*

by Andie Miller on Oct 31st, 2011 [Tweet](#) [Like 13](#)

*Just when I thought *Slow Motion* had disappeared, there's a thoughtful review by Gill Gimberg in the New Contrast:*

When I sat down to write this review I caught myself puzzling over the genre: was this a book of essays or travel tales? Was the writing autobiographical or biographical? Where, in other words, did *Slow Motion* fit in with other books of non-fiction I've read? I felt a bit silly to be grappling with the genre rather than concentrating on the contents of the book. But, by the time I had come to the conclusion that the genre didn't matter – that 'stories', as Andie herself calls them, would suffice as a descriptor – I had meandered down many interesting paths: into the remote foreign places I love to visit in travel and adventure books, into the fictional lives of others in novels and short stories, and into the minds of my favourite essayists.

Not too different, in fact, from a leisurely ramble through the pages of *Slow Motion: stories about walking*, a satisfyingly *companionable* book.

The act of walking grounds us. It connects us, as nothing else does, with the earth. Whether we're walking in a busy city street or in wilderness, walking reminds us that we're part of humanity, but also connected with every other living species on the planet. It can be humbling. And humility and connectedness are characteristics that all the walkers in *Slow Motion* share. It seems to me that the

simple act of travelling from one place to another, at the forced slow speed of our own legs and with the inevitable contact with other pedestrians, makes us more fully human.

Not so, being behind the wheel of a car. In 'Stepping into the Future' Gordon Bruce talks of the ability of drivers to turn 'a blind eye to certain social realities', whereas when walking 'you have decidedly closer contact with others ... and you absorb the atmosphere around you'. In 'Conscientious Objections' David, Gordon's son, says that 'when you're driving, you suddenly have that sense of power when people have to scurry around in front of you ... It's a type of tyranny.' David wasn't always a driver and he still travels on foot whenever he can. For him, choosing to walk is part of being an environmentalist.

Andie's walkers are connected in other ways than family ties or place. Many of the walkers she interviews speak of how walking is vital to their creativity. Phaswane Mpe, in 'In the Footsteps of Bosman and Dickens, via Hillbrow', says that it is through walking that he finds his stories, and in 'Cappella' Graham Weir, described as a dedicated walker, talks of how ideas formulate during his walks, how songs and stories he is writing come together during and after a walk. But it appears walking has its hazards for a person immersed in theatre and Graham says he is 'often late for things because [he stops] to watch people, and how they interact'. He also finds time to talk to people, like Sylvia, who lives 'in the park at the moment' and who tells him stories 'for a small fee'. The book abounds with gentle humour and irony.

Walking in South Africa of course attracts another hazard, namely that 'obligatory question of crime and, as a person who walks and drives, I think of how often I am thankful to own a car when I need go somewhere at night or pass through an area where I would not feel comfortable on foot. The walkers in *Slow Motion* deal with the everpresent threat of crime in different ways, but most of them choose to not walk after sunset, use a taxi and avoid certain areas. They also speak of becoming more attuned to their instincts.

Probably the most distressing hidden cost of the crime in this country is loss of personal freedom. A crime has motivated two of the stories, of Dex in 'Grace Notes', who is wheelchair-bound after being shot, and of Paul in 'Metal and Flesh', who lost a leg and most of his sight in a hit-and-run by a drunken driver. These stories have a surprising twist: the acceptance and total lack of bitterness of the men, neither of whom accepts the label of victim. The latter story also highlights that the biggest danger to pedestrians is, of course, the driver – as the South African statistics show.

While many of the interviewees walk from choice, others walk because they have to. Lovey and Thelma, in 'From the Margins', travel unbelievably circuitous and time-consuming routes, on foot using public transport, to and from work every day. In 'Half a Continent, Step by Step', Innocent walked thousands of kilometres in order to escape the massacre in Rwanda and now adds mileage to his legs around Johannesburg.

The fact that travelling on foot is a class issue in some parts of the world, including South Africa, is one of the insights of the book. In a country where those who can afford it own and drive cars, middleclass people, and especially white people, given South Africa's troubled history, are considered odd if they don't drive or choose to walk. Having, or choosing, to walk becomes a class issue. Apart from the other benefits of walking, and not only environmental, so ably presented in *Slow Motion*, this lends walking a kind of political power.

Some people, of course, walk for other reasons. In 'Shabbat in Glenhazel', a traditionally Jewish suburb of Johannesburg, religion dictates that there be no driving on the Sabbath and families take the streets, with pushchairs and reluctant children in tow. In 'On Fairways and Bunkers', Moses reminds readers of South Africa's past, when most senior white employees used to disappear to the weekly Wednesday afternoon appointment with Green & Rough: 'And I used to remain in the office answering telephones, running around like mad, wondering where these guys were, and I found out later that they were playing golf.' As a black golfer in a recently whites-only world, Moses laughs at his experiences, but is committed to the game. From the other side of the club, Alec, who has worked as a caddie at the Killarney Country Club for eleven years, shares fascinating stories about the world of

caddying. Walking for a cause is covered in the story 'From March to Parade' which discusses the early days of the Pride marches and touches upon some complex ideologies, as well as the danger and complexity added to life by the simple fact of not being able to be labelled 'heterosexual'.

Slow Motion certainly doesn't lack variety. The fact that the stories were collected over many years adds to the interest value: the book often reads as a historical commentary, from an interesting, 'close up' perspective. There is a strong underlying philosophical current that lends itself to slow and thoughtful reading. In fact, *Slow Motion* is one of those books you need to own, not borrow, to enable you to dip into it often and regularly, and savour one story at a time, preferably with a long walk in between readings to aid the digestion.

While the reader gets to know the interviewees by their answers, it is through the questions asked and the odd perceptive comment that Andie reveals herself to the reader. And you will soon realise as you amble through the book how each deceptively simple title succeeds, like a well-drawn map, in guiding the reading of the story. Otherwise her authorial touch is subtle; none of the stories are overpowered by her introductions, comments or conclusions and the interviewees are allowed to have their say.

Like a good long walk, *Slow Motion* is a thoroughly enjoyable and satisfying book.

Andie has been an actress, a webmaster and journalist. She is a graduate of the MA in writing programme from Wits University and *Slow Motion* won the Ernst van Heerden Creative Writing Award from Wits in 2009.

The book contains 364 pages, thirty-four stories and five simple maps that give an idea of the vast collective distances covered by the featured walkers, and locate the stories for the reader. There is also a fairly comprehensive list of references.

Slow Motion is published by Jacana (2010).

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Andie Miller, Gill Gimberg, Jacana, New Contrast, Slow Motion, South Africa, stories about walking

Quick URL

The Big Druid's fingers do the walking

by Andie Miller on Jun 11th, 2011 [Tweet](#) [Like 0](#)

A year ago today, as the World Cup began, I took a walk with conceptual artist Willem Boshoff.

Having spent the past six years writing about walking, I thought I had looked at it from every angle: From pilgrimage to cruising, interviewing moms of little people learning to toddle, refugees and those who simply walk because they can't afford a car. But I hadn't walked with the Big Druid, conceptual artist Willem Boshoff.

For the duration of the World Cup, Boshoff is performing *Big Druid in His Cubicle* and *Big Druid Walking in the City* as part of *In Context*, a series of exhibitions, installations and performances happening around Johannesburg.

The aim of the series is to explore “tensions of place” and notions of home. During this time Boshoff is living in his exhibition space at Arts on Main. He leaves only to do his daily walks along Main Reef Road from 8am to 10am. Over the course of the month he plans to explore most of Main Reef Road. Anyone is welcome to join him.

Main Reef Road was built at the end of the 19th century and was originally created to service the mining industry. It stretches across 45km and 28 pages of the *Witwatersrand Street Guide* — from Roodepoort in the West, through the city centre, to Boksburg in the East.

‘I walk very slowly’

“I must warn you,” Boshoff said when I let him know that I was keen to join him for the first day, “I walk very slowly.”

I was relieved. I’d imagined having to stride alongside this tall, bearded man — who was once described as looking like “part messiah, part bergie” — just to keep up. A slow walk with him and his camera, I thought, would be like walking with the small children of a friend of mine, where every object is a potential treasure with a story to tell.

As it turned out, it was more of a mini-road trip — in the quaint Druidmobile, a turquoise retro Chevrolet truck from the Seventies, with a bumper sticker that says *Sien jou daar* (see you there) — and an hour-long exploration of a very small section of the road. Every day he will stop at a different point.

We had been warned by a note on the gallery wall before we set off that “during the actual walk visitors may accompany him by walking with him or by watching him from a distance but, regrettably, he will not be able to answer questions, be sociable or even talk during the walk. The purpose of the walk is to create an opportunity for Big Druid to see and record what he sees. This takes concentration and he apologises if he may appear unsociable.”

It was an icy, overcast morning and, after pacing up and down for half an hour trying to keep warm while watching the big man with a very small camera (Canon G10) peering up close at barbed wire, walls and gravel, the wind-chill factor got to me and I retreated behind the windshield of the Druidmobile with Boshoff’s assistant, Juliet.

‘I think he is looking at textures’

Paul Botes, the *Mail & Guardian*’s photographer, seemed to be getting what Boshoff was doing. “I think he’s looking at textures,” he said, apparently as fascinated by Boshoff as Boshoff was by whatever he was seeing through his little lens.

Back at the Big Druid’s cubicle in the gallery, everything was revealed. “Come, let me show you,” he said. The miracle of modern technology — he plugged the disk from his camera into the computer and instantly there they were: the surprisingly captivating colours and shapes, spikes and spirals that he had seen. If I didn’t know better I might have thought it was paint on canvas.

“They’re fragments, figments,” he said. “I’m putting things in a window so that I can see them, and opening a window for other people to see as well.”

Suddenly I got it — what he was finding on Main Reef Road as I was caught up in being dwarfed by trucker-sized signage for places “To Let”, “Giant Motor Spares” and a billboard for margarine advising us to “Share a little more sunshine”. My tendency would have been to walk through it and experience what it felt like, being a pedestrian in this apparently barren industrial area alongside the Cleveland railway station.

From Boshoff’s point of view, what author Phillip Lopate said of his own walks could just as well apply here — that it was not the walk itself that was important to him “so much as to be invaded by sharp glimpses of heart-stopping beauty, to take back with me and muse over in my rooms”.

“I took 121 pictures this morning,” said Boshoff. “It will be a bit of a battle, looking at them and not knowing ... In the end I might throw all of it out because I might be terribly disappointed and I might

have to adjust my thinking. Or I might be very excited. This one hour that we just spent will turn into many hours of working, making sense of what I saw. After 30 days I'll have about 3 000 to go through which might give me about 120 images. From this morning I may keep three or four.

"I'm looking for the nymphs, the mythological spirit of the place. The nymph comes to you through the cracks of the dust and the dirt."

I'm reminded of the idea of *pentimento*, the traces that remain of the beginnings of a painting after an artist has changed his mind and painted over it. Occasionally when the paint peels away, or you scratch at it, the earlier remnants are revealed.

"I'm looking for the nymph of the migrant workers, people temporarily dislocated and relocated and messed around by circumstance, the finite existence of transient things, people who have no real home except in-between things."

'My whole life changed'

He first performed *Big Druid in His Cubicle* last year in Basel. "The idea of the Druid lifestyle was prompted when I discovered that I had lead poisoning five years ago, from sanding and inhaling oil paint, and basically I was dying. I was in incredible pain all the time and, I thought, this is it. And then to discover what was wrong with me ... My whole life changed. I started looking and seeing more attentively. Coming back to life, it brings back colour. I see things more vividly. I feel more alive than I've ever felt before."

If you'd like to see the Big Druid in action, wear a warm jacket and prepare to be loitering rather than walking for an hour. He sets off from Arts on Main at eight every morning except Thursday, when he leaves at 9am, and on Monday the gallery is closed.

Or visit him in his cubicle between 10am and 4pm. And after you've looked at his exhibition, ask him to show you his pictures of Main Reef Road. They're strangely beautiful.

This article first appeared in the Mail & Guardian, 18-24 June 2010.

Cats: South Africa

Tags: Andie Miller, Art, Arts on Main, Main Reef Road, Phillip Lopate, Slow Motion, South Africa, stories about walking, Willem Boshoff, World Cup 2010

Quick URL

Walking with Ghosts

by Andie Miller on May 9th, 2011 [Tweet](#)  Like 0

"A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch. A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world," wrote Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. I was struck by this when watching *A Beautiful Mind*, the film about schizophrenic mathematician, John Nash, and how he continued to walk to work every day.

There has long been a connection between walking and mental health; particularly depression, or melancholy, as it used to be called. Most notable amongst the writer-walkers, apart from Virginia Woolf, were the three German-language writers: Robert Walser – Swiss, and contemporary of Franz

Kafka; Walter Benjamin; and WG Sebald. Apart from their walking habits, and their melancholy, what they had in common was admiration for their work by literary scholar Susan Sontag. The title of Sontag's essay on Benjamin, "Under the Sign of Saturn", could equally have been applied to Walser and Sebald.

In *Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's opus – which documents a walking tour through East Anglia in England where he lived and later died in a car accident, and the accompanying stream of consciousness journey – the walk ends where the book begins, with the narrator unable to move, after being hospitalised for depression. "The wandering that the prose does, both syntactically and in terms of subjects," says literary journalist Michael Silverblatt, puts him in mind of Thomas De Quincey: "the need in a sense to almost sleepwalk, somnambulate, from one centre of attention to another, and a feeling in the reader that one has hallucinated the connection between the parts".

Robert Walser's walks are smaller in scale. In his story "The Street (1)", there are echoes of Baudelaire's "To a Passerby":



I wanted to speak with someone, but found no time.... In the midst of the unrelenting forward thrust I felt the wish to stand still. The muchness and the motion were too much and too fast. Everyone withdrew from everyone. There was a running, as of something liquefied, a constant going forth, as of evaporation....

As I was passing by, a woman's eyes spoke to me: 'Come with me. Quit the whirlpool, leave that farrago behind, join the only person who will make you strong....' I wanted to follow her call, but was swept away in the stream. The street was just too irresistible.

There is a photograph of an old man, lying in the snow; a hat lies above him, with footsteps leading from the top of the frame into the middle of the image, "his last steps in the slush". This is the picture taken by the police on Christmas day in 1956, when children stumbled upon the 78-year-old Walser's frozen body. He had not written since 1932, when he was institutionalised by his family for schizophrenia (probably a wrongful diagnosis), and declared: "I'm not here to write, I'm here to be mad". But he never stopped walking.

Walser remains something of a well-kept secret in the English-speaking world, and is said to have had a great influence on Kafka, who in his piece, "The spur-of-the-moment stroll", examines the positive effects of stepping out into the cold night, and discovering that "one has, after all, more ability than one has need easily to effect and endure the most rapid change ... then for that evening one has stepped completely outside of one's family". And he realises: "The whole experience is enhanced when at the late hour one looks up a friend to see how he is".

Virginia Woolf reaches similar conclusions in "Street Haunting", when she goes out to buy a pencil: "The hour should be the evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of air and the sociability of the streets are grateful." Except her reasons for escape are her own company. "As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six," she continues, "we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room. For there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience". And after all her encounters along the way, she realises: "to escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorway again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self ... sheltered and enclosed".

This paradox of leaving and returning is a constant refrain of the compulsive-walker; particularly the writer-walker. In the late fifteenth century, the poet Ficino wrote a book warning scholars and students

people, that because of their sedentary occupations, they could easily become severely depressed. cautioned that they should find ways of managing the effects of being “Saturn’s Child”.

In Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, he described Walser’s writing, with one of his customary aphorisms, as “quite aimless (and yet no less enchanting) linguistic savagery”, and declared his tale to be “the product not of the nervous tension of the decadent, but of the pure and vibrant mood of convalescent”. And Sontag said of Walser, “for whom walking was the centre of his reclusive life”, that he “spent much of his life obsessively turning time into space”.

Like Woolf, Benjamin had been taught to “revere mountains and forests – a photograph of him as a child shows him holding an alpenstock before some painted Alps” – but he preferred the aloneness to the crowd of the city. “Multitude, solitude: identical terms ...” wrote Baudelaire in *Paris Spleen*. Benjamin’s friend Gershom Scholem said of him: “I don’t think I ever saw him walk with his head erect. His gait had something unmistakable about it, something pensive and tentative, which was probably due to shortsightedness”. As Benjamin put it: “it was thirty years before the distinction between left and right had become visceral to me, and before I had acquired the art of reading a street map”. Rebecca Solnit imagines him walking the streets of Paris, “passing without noticing another person with worse eyesight, James Joyce, who lived there from 1920 to 1940”, and Sontag describes his “sober daydreamer’s gaze of the myopic”. But Benjamin himself called it stubbornness, developed when walking with his mother as a child: “above all, a gaze that appears to see not a third of what it takes in”. Scholem said he seemed marked by “a profound sadness”. This state of melancholy had some benefits, though, and Benjamin declared that “nothing can overcome my patience”.

There is talk of the *flâneurs*, around 1840, taking turtles for walks in the Paris arcades. “The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them,” Benjamin wrote. “If they had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace”.

Poet Gérard de Nerval was witnessed taking a lobster for a walk, but this was for reasons other than speed. “Why should a lobster be any more ridiculous than a dog?” he demanded. “Or a cat, or a gazelle, or a lion, or any other animal that one chooses to take for a walk? I have a liking for lobster. They are peaceful, serious creatures. They know the secrets of the sea, they don’t bark, and they do not gnaw upon one’s *monadic* privacy like dogs do. And Goethe had an aversion to dogs, and he wasn’t mad”.

For Sebald, the crowd in the city seemed to hold little fascination. For him it was tramping through the countryside, and the ghosts of those who had gone before, accompanied by the libraries of his mind that drove him. Throughout his novel, *Austerlitz*, the concentration camp is the “invisible referent” (Michael Silverblatt put it) “left out, but always gestured towards”. Sebald explained by quoting Benjamin: “There is no point in exaggerating that which is already horrific”.

“As you walk along, you find things,” said Sebald. “I think that’s the advantage of walking. It’s just one of the reasons I do that a lot. You find things by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian which is in a tiny little museum somewhere, and which you would never find in London. ... in that you find odd details that lead you somewhere else ... in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he is looking for.... So you then have a small amount of material and you accumulate things, and it grows, and one thing takes you to another and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials. And, as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things”.

“I like to listen to people who have been sidelined in one way or another,” he said, referring to the “conspiracy of silence” after World War II. There is “some sort of emptiness somewhere that needs to be filled by accounts from witnesses one can trust. I would never have encountered these witnesses if I hadn’t left my native country at the age of twenty, because the people who could tell you the truth, or something at least approximating the truth, did not exist in their country any longer, but one could find them in Manchester and in Leeds or in North London or in Paris, Belgium ...” Places are as much

characters in his books as people are; some more melancholy than others. “If there can be a moment like an epiphany,” he said, “it can be achieved only by actually going to certain places, and exposing oneself to these places”.

Silverblatt describes the tone of his writing as “pastoral philosophy ... characterised by tenderness, bewilderment, horror, pity, self-mortification ... [with] tenderness brought to bear on subjects that have usually compelled indignation, scorn, and huge and glittering contempt”. Sebald replied: “In order to get the full measure of the horrific, one needs to remind the reader of beatific moments in it requires that contrast. Old-fashionedness of the diction, or of the narrative tone, is therefore not to do with nostalgia for a better age that’s gone past, but it is simply something that, as it were, heightens the awareness of that which we have managed to engineer in this century”.

Paul Auster, too, speaks of the need to immerse oneself in a place, in order to acquaint oneself with ghosts.

“ All during the three days he spent in Amsterdam, he was lost. The plan of the city is circular (a series of concentric circles, bisected by canals, a cross-hatch of hundreds of tiny bridges, each one connecting to another, as though endlessly), and you cannot simply “follow” a street as you can in other cities. To get somewhere you have to know in advance where you are going. A. did not, since he was a stranger, and moreover found himself curiously reluctant to consult a map. For three days it rained, and for three days he walked around in circles. He realised that in comparison to New York (or New Amsterdam, as he was fond of saying to himself after he returned), Amsterdam was a small place, a city whose streets could probably be memorised in ten days.... He wandered. He walked around in circles. He allowed himself to be lost. Sometimes, he later discovered, he would be only a few feet from his destination, but not knowing where to turn, would then go off in the wrong direction, thereby taking himself farther from where he thought he was going. Cut off from everything that was familiar to him, unable to discover even a single point of reference, he saw that his steps, by taking him nowhere, were taking him nowhere but into himself. He was wandering inside himself, and he was lost. Far from troubling him, this state of being lost became a source of happiness, of exhilaration. He breathed it into his very bones. As if on the brink of some previously hidden knowledge, he breathed it into his very bones and said to himself, almost triumphantly: “I am lost.”

But when he does finally reach his destination, he feels differently:

“ It was a Sunday morning, gray with rain, and the streets along the canal were deserted. He climbed the steep and narrow staircase inside the house and entered the secret annex. As he stood in Anne Frank’s room, the room in which the diary was written, now bare, with the faded pictures of Hollywood movie stars she had collected still pasted to the walls, he suddenly found himself crying. Not sobbing as might happen in response to a deep inner pain, but crying without sound, the tears streaming down his cheeks, as if purely in response to the world....

From the window of that room, facing out on the backyard, you can see the rear windows of a house in which Descartes once lived. There are children’s swings in the yard now, toys scattered in the grass, pretty little flowers. As he looked out the window that day, he wondered if the children those toys belonged to had any idea of what had happened thirty-five years earlier in the spot where he was standing. And if they did, what it would be like to grow up in the shadow of Anne Frank’s

The German writers were always in the shadow of the Nazis. Walser wrote: “I stopped writing in Herisau. Why should I continue to write? The Nazis have destroyed my world: The newspapers I used to write for have folded, their editors have been chased away or have died. I’m pretty close to being fossil”. And Benjamin, fearing being interned in a concentration camp when he was about to be sent back to France during the invasion, while attempting to cross the Spanish border, took an overdose of morphine.

Virginia Woolf, too, having lived through the first world war, was overwhelmed with dread during the second. On 8 June 1940, she wrote: “Shall I ever finish these notes – let alone make a book of them? The battle is at its crisis; every night the Germans fly over England; it comes closer to this house daily. If we are beaten then – however we solve that problem, and one solution is suicide (so it was decided three nights ago in London among us) – book writing becomes doubtful. But I wish to go on, not to settle down in that dismal puddle”.

On 28 March 1941, she filled her pockets with stones, and took her last walk, into the River Ouse near her home in Sussex.

While they may have been born “under the sign of Saturn”, there is no underestimating the effects of finding themselves on either side of the goose-stepping of war had on the psyches of these writers.

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