

CHAPTER THREE

Getting the Story Down on Paper

People come into feature writing because they're confident they can write. So, in the beginning at least, most believe they are writers first. If they were just reporters, they would probably work on the news side. But the lesson all these would-be feature writers must learn, and a lesson that is preached over and over again, is that feature writing is nothing without reporting. And what is reporting? It is everything that precedes writing. I have asked the contributors to this section to break the process down in terms of research, interviewing and then organization. Beyond that there is the art of simply hanging around, of being there for the right moment. David Finkel, a writer at the *The Washington Post Magazine*, puts it all together for us, and we see how the best nonfiction writing can't happen without solid reporting.

On Being a Reporter First

David Finkel

One day, long ago, an editor took aside his new feature writer and tried to make a point.

"I just want to tell you, you're some kind of writer," the editor said. "In fact, it's an interesting thing. Whenever there's a hole in one of your stories, you write around it so smoothly that most readers probably aren't even aware a hole is there."

"Thank you," I said, missing the point.

And with that, I was put on the police beat.

"It's time you learned to be a reporter," the editor said. "Some day, you'll thank me."

Well, I don't know about that, but in the dozen or so years since that day, I have learned two general truths about journalism.

One is that writing, for the most part, isn't a lot of fun. Some people may think otherwise, and that's fine. I have met all kinds of people over the years, including those who think it's fun to mock the injured and razz the dead. In such a world, surely there's a place for those who think writing is a good time. Not me. Writing and I have had our moments, but for the most part I'd rather be reporting.

Truth number two: reporting, for the most part, is fun. Tracking down the arcane, interviewing the reluctant, observing the hidden — all of that can be a joy. And a good thing, too, because in the line of work we've chosen, reporting — hard, solid reporting — is at the center of what we do.

Think about the best journalism you have read, and you'll realize this is true. The best stories may seem to turn on wonderful writing, but if you look closely enough you'll discover the true strength of these stories is that every sentence reports some specific piece of information. Maybe it's a fact that gives context. Maybe it's a quote that establishes tone. Maybe it's a description that defines the background.

Whatever it is, it provides some kind of essential detail, and when all the details are added together, the result is a story that takes a reader to a particular time and makes it so real it's as if the reader is his own witness.

The best stories, in other words, are more than a retelling, they're an experience of the senses. A reader doesn't only learn something from a good feature story, he feels it. He sees it, smells it, hears it. He comes to know it down to its most affecting details. He is there.

That's the reader's end.

The writer's end is to regard feature writing as anything but a soft, comfortable undertaking. Put simply, the best stories require a lot of work. There is no formula for producing these stories, but there is a general process to follow that can be broken down into three broad areas: research, interviewing and observation.

In this process, writing is the translation. Reporting is the key.

Research

A colleague of mine, Jack Reed, knows about research.

One time, tracking down a trail of receipts involving a local sheriff, Reed ended up in a small building in North Carolina. "It was a metal shed, like something you'd put your lawnmower in," he says. "It had a metal door and one window that didn't open. It was hot and filled with boxes of gas-purchase receipts for airplanes. It was right off the end of an airport runway, and when jets took off the noise was deafening."

Reed spent a day and a half in that shed sifting through thousands of receipts and never found what he was looking for. A year and a half later, the miseries of those hours were assuaged when he received a Pulitzer Prize for the things he did find. But to this day, the time in the shed remains fresh in his mind. "I'll never forget it," he says. "It was like hell."

The point is, Reed did it because of the potential to make a good story better, and that, at its most basic, is what research is. It's an essential source that can provide you with all kinds of information, from what you don't know to what you haven't thought of. It's a necessity no matter if you are doing an investigative piece like Reed or a simple feature story.

The wonderful part of research is that the paths it can take you down are almost limitless. There are the obvious sources, such as newspaper and magazine clippings, but I've also gotten information from probate files, divorce files, voters' registration records, the Census Bureau, the Weather Service, old high school yearbooks, even the documentary stamps attached to someone's recorded land deeds.

At the least, research provides names, addresses and other starting points for interviews. At best, it provides the kind of authoritative detail that can set a story apart.

Such was the case when I set out to write about a man named Charles Griffith, who was about to go on trial for first-degree murder. This was the lead I wrote:

MIAMI— He was a distraught man that day, a man who sang lullabies and wept. With one hand, he held a gun. With the other, he stroked the smooth face of his daughter, a 3-year-old existing in limbo between life and death.

An hour before, he had given her what he thought was a fatal dose