

CHAPTER SEVEN

Getting to The Top

No new writer will totally enjoy Jon Franklin's advice on becoming great. You see, he offers no overnight formula. But he does offer a long-term plan, a plan good only for those willing to stick to it as he did. And for him it paid off with two Pulitzer prizes. He shares more of his secrets for writing dramatic nonfiction in his book *Writing for Story* (A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1986).

How Feature Writers Become Great

Jon Franklin

Like many of my students today, I came to journalism as an orphan child of fiction. I had literary ambitions and, given that, would far rather have written short stories. That, after all, had been the training ground for the Great Ones, for Hemingway and Steinbeck and all the rest.

But they lived in a kinder world. I was of the first luckless generation to enter my apprenticeship after the extinction of the magazine giants and the concurrent demise of the short story as a commercial form. The door had slammed shut in my face; there was no way I could feed a family writing short stories.

Hemingway's edict was clear, though: If you were going to be

a writer, you had to write. The ante, then as now, was to put a million words through your typewriter.

Worse, those million words had to be *published*. History was very specific on that point. Exposing your writing to editors and audiences and suffering the consequences was critical. If you got applause, you learned something; if you got raspberries and rotten tomatoes, which was more likely, you still learned something. You never learned much of anything when writing for yourself, which was why writing for yourself was to real writing what masturbation was to sex.

It was also necessary to get paid for what you wrote, a truth that in my case had to do with family responsibilities, but which also had larger implications. For, as W. Somerset Maugham had so acidly reasoned it through, writers were supposed to be smart, weren't they? And it was definitely not smart to starve. Therefore, the phrase "starving writer" was a contradiction in terms.

Given these realities I looked around and saw only one opportunity: journalism.

What? Covering muggings and traffic accidents, quoting politicians, sitting through town council meetings? Me? To a young man of my literary pretensions, this was not a very satisfactory answer.

Still, it seemed better than, say, selling insurance.

And besides, I told myself, I'd only be doing it for a while. I'd be slumming, but they'd see real quick what a fine young writer I was—too good for the newsroom, clearly. So they'd move me over to the feature desk. I'd make my reputation writing features. Then, when the time came, I'd take some time off and write the Great American Novel.

Facing Newsroom Realities

The ambience of the newsroom, of course, was anathema to all this.

The city room culture, then as now, was dominated by the Jack Webb school of journalism. Just the facts, ma'am. Who, what, when, where and why . . . always assuming there's time for a why.

Keep it under 14 inches. Can I quote that? Is that "Philip" with one "l" or two? *Whadda you mean you don't know? What kinda reporter are you? Copy over!*

Hey, Franklin! The cops have a floater at the inner harbor. Run down and find out what's going on! Take a photographer with you!

It was a brutal experience, the truth is, for one whose heart so warmly beat to the rhythms of Joyce, say, or Remarque. I responded in the only logical fashion, which was by trying to write it better than the normal stuff you see wrapped around the tire ads.

The gods aren't totally cruel, though. There always seems to be an editor around who does care, someone who will play mentor for a young writer. I had one . . . or maybe, come to think of it, he had me. In any event, one day early in my career he pulled me aside.

"Franklin," he said, "you tried to make this a great piece. Well, it's not.

"It could have been, maybe, but who knows? All I know is that it's not—and that there's only one way of making sure that you won't write a great piece, and you found it."

I stared at him, waiting. Well? Well?

"The only way to insure that you won't write a great piece," he said, articulating very precisely as though I was a seven-year-old, "is to set out to write a great piece."

I stared at him, bewildered. Now, what kind of thing to say was *that*? What did he mean?

Did he mean I was being too self-conscious? Should I spend more time being conscious of the self-consciousness of my copy? I could have grabbed him by the necktie!

What was I supposed to do? Tell me what to do!

He looked at me sort of sadly, for a long time.

"Nah," he finally said. "Nah. Forget it."

So what was one to make of that? Was it some kind of code? Was he supposed to understand?

Was he supposed to understand *any* of what was going on?

And what does one do, the young artist, when some fool of an editor strips off the whole first paragraph of his story, thus deleting a half-day's work and agony . . . and then sends the rest of the piece through mostly unchanged?

And how does the young artist react, in the secret, sensitive artistic center of his mind, when some Hun of an assistant city desk man laughs at him for the way he uses commas?

Well, one slinks away and licks the wound in private.

What the hell is so funny about my commas?

And what was wrong with the lead?

And then, in simple self-defense, one sets art aside for a day or two and learns everything there is to know about commas. That way,

