

Richard Stern: A Backward Look

Serious writers seldom view journalism favorably. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom brings a newspaper to “the jakes”—Irish slang for an outhouse—and after reading an article or two, cleans himself with the paper. Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power*, “Once daily prayers, now daily newspapers.” Allan Bloom’s gloss on this is that “the busy, the cheap, the ephemeral had usurped all that remained of the eternal in daily life.” Johan Heuzinga, the great Dutch historian, visited the U.S. after the Great War and wrote that “For an American editor, boring the public means sinning against the Holy Ghost of democracy. What finally matters is to get and hold attention. . . .There is a very deliberate effort to reduce the effort of thought required, and to capture attention. . . .The overwhelming bulk of reading matter becomes very limited in character.” In *The Bostonians*, Henry James called journalism—he would, wouldn’t he?—“that great new science for beating the sense out of words.”

“I confess that I do not feel toward the freedom of the press that complete and instantaneous love that one grants to things that by their very nature are supremely good.” Such is Tocqueville’s qualified endorsement of American newspapers. He accepts their necessity in the age of “popular sovereignty,” but regrets that journalism is “so peculiarly compounded of goods and evils that

without it liberty cannot survive and with it order can scarcely be maintained.”

Reporters? Their education is “rudimentary at best” and “they express their ideas in a vulgar way.” “Scribbling scoundrels” is the way Saul Bellow describes the newspapermen in the Dickens novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

These remarks are worth considering because Richard Stern has placed the life of a journalist at the center of *Natural Shocks*, his novel from 1978. Frederick Wursup is a reporter, a magazine writer and the author of a best-selling book with the puerile name of *Down the American Drain*. The book chronicles the spectacular fall of once-successful men in American life, and a reader is reminded implicitly that *Natural Shocks* was written during the Nixon years. In Stern’s words, “people need the diversion of other people’s troubles.” Wursup’s agent, typical of the publishing business, is certainly diverted by the success of the book; she foresees a sequence of best-selling “*Drains*,” covering South America, Europe, and other continents. Like executives everywhere, she concentrates on the repetition of a successful formula. Poking around for some subject or other to fill the pages of his magazine, an editor encourages Wursup to write a piece on mortality; it seems the newest hot topic. “There are twenty books a month coming in for review on death and dying,” he tells Wursup. “You know how subjects rise out of nowhere and take over. . . That Kubler-Ross lady started it in Chicago. Every slut kicking off in the wards is propped up to lecture interns.” Wursup dismisses

the editor's work as "converting the everyday into the sensational," but ultimately accepts the assignment. (The editor must have known what he was talking about, because books and articles on the subject find a ready audience to this day. The most recent addition to the literature is a memoir of her son's premature death by one Alexandra Fuller, and the current edition of *The Atlantic* magazine offers a piece by a minister dying of cancer.) Such was Stern's view of book and magazine publishing in the U.S., and little has changed since then.

Wursup is tossed and lifted by the hydraulics of the American fame-making machinery, and Stern's criticism of it continues apace. *The New York Times* sends a reporter to his apartment for an interview, and the published result is filled with factual errors. Besieged with requests, the newly famous writer offers opinions on subjects he may know little about. The "listicles" he prepares include the world's five most beautiful women and the ten worst presidential decisions ever made, bite-sized little contributions that ever-busy readers can absorb. To reporters soliciting his opinion, he offers silly remarks that pass for insight. "Modern urban life," he says in one interview, "is made for the single, the clumsy, the lustful. Can't cook, you heat up a Stouffer's; cold, turn up the thermostat. In danger, call the cops, unless the danger's the cop." Like many others in journalism, he can be intrusive and pushy when extracting information from subjects. Stern captures this in an interview Wursup conducts with a tormented movie director, a man who lives

an intensely isolated life. Wursup asks, “Is there anyone in the world—man, woman, child, animal--to whom you are close or have ever been close? It’s the sort of thing people very much want to know.” The director answers the question, though there is no particular reason why he should. He owes the public nothing more than his work, and there’s no reason to be concerned with what “other people very much want to know.” Even Wursup himself later regrets pushing the man into a corner with his questions.

There’s more. At the beginning of the story, he discovers from the roof of his building that he can spy with binoculars on his former wife’s apartment, just a few blocks away. He makes a regular habit of doing so, checking for visitors and her goings-on. On the last page of the novel he returns to the roof but is disappointed to learn that his former wife, newly remarried, has moved away. This would appear to be Stern’s final comment on the American press.

I couldn’t help wondering if some of these details didn’t derive from Stern’s own brush with fame and the famous writers he knew, like Bellow and Roth. *Other Men’s Daughters*, his immediate preceding novel from 1973, was his most commercially successful book, and *The New York Review of Books* thought highly enough of it to republish the novel a few years ago. The new edition included an introduction by Philip Roth. I can imagine the publicity the novel engendered and

its possible effect on *Natural Shocks*, and Stern would have been familiar with the experience of other famous writers that he knew, including Bellow and Philip Roth.

The title of the book, of course, draws on Hamlet's reference to "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," and many of the characters in the novel are affected by serious bodily afflictions. (The book is dedicated to a University of Chicago instructor who died of cancer in his forties.) The film director that Wursup profiles commits suicide long after the interview, as do Wursup's father and the companion he lived with in a neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Wursup's parents hadn't lived together for years, because dementia has seriously damaged his mother's mind; she hasn't recognized her son for years, and is living out what little life she has in a suburban Chicago nursing home. (I've read that one-third of Americans over 65 will suffer dementia, some seriously, before they die.) When the reporter returns to Chicago to settle his father's affairs, he encounters an aged university professor tending his lawn, an instructor he knew decades before as a student at the University of Chicago. A scholarly firebrand for most of his life, "a great hater," sharply correcting the views of his students and philosophers living and dead, the retired professor has become a ghost of his former self, friendly, approachable, almost harmless. (For those

familiar with the history of the university, the character sounds like Leo Strauss.) A German Jewish immigrant living in Rome whom Wursup knows keels over with a near-fatal heart attack during a sexual encounter with a whore. And then there are the cancer patients he's invited to meet at St. Vincent's, a well-known hospital in Greenwich Village that closed some years ago. Word has entered the press that he's researching a piece on mortality, and a nurse contacts him, believing that "meeting a famous writer" will "cheer up" her patients. How a reporter quizzing them on their illness is going to achieve this effect isn't clear, but he accepts the offer and meets one of them, Francesca Buell. (Oliver Sacks, dying of cancer in 2015, considered the matter sufficiently important to warrant discussing it in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*. *The Times* editors evidently agreed, in a tawdry show of mutual exploitation.) Francesca's father flies in from Los Angeles to be with her, and the two will meander in and out of the narrative for a few hundred pages. Wursup's girlfriend, Sookie Gumbert, a geophysicist, has a laboratory of cosmetics to enhance her natural beauty, aware that it will fade with time, but doing everything she can to prevent it. Natural shocks indeed.

There's more to the novel than death and dying, and that part of the story involves the doings of Susan Wursup, the reporter's former wife. She is a writer for *Chouinard's*, a failing newsletter with a small circulation reporting on economics and politics. What the staff mostly does is digest and condense the reporting of

larger news organizations; the publication itself is far too small to produce original reporting and analysis. The chief editor, Keven Miyako, loses his wife to cancer—another fatality of the story—and at the end of the novel becomes Susan’s second husband. He labors to keep the publication alive with the usual economies, but matters don’t really improve until a young addition to the staff, independently wealthy, volunteers her funds to support the newsletter.

Amy Schlosserberg comes from a monied family and is essentially subsidizing her job. She belongs to the generation that came of age in the 1970s, followers of Woodward and Bernstein and Seymour Hersh, students who flocked to journalism schools hoping to have a career exposing atrocities and corruption. This was the new world of investigative reporting and celebrity journalists, and many tried to enter it. “She believed,” Stern writes, “that the essence of the best journalism was the discovery of secrets and the exposure of hypocrisy.” The ultimate goal was “to democratize knowledge,” a phrase that will remind readers of language applied to the internet a generation later, to baleful effect. The public should know what the business and political insiders know, because “the inside story” is invariably one of deceit and corruption; or so younger journalists believed. Amy’s reporting raises *Chouinard’s* profile and drags it in a new direction. Formerly staid and second rate, the publication attracts fresh readers and an assortment of tips that undermine or advance one private agenda or another.

More invitations to press conferences come its way, and Amy is ultimately given a column that makes the older staff writers uneasy. Wursup runs into one of them in a walk in Central Park, and the older man tells him “Our gang is very nervous about her. But it’s the gossip era, and she’s a master.” Smugness and mediocrity, even a note of corruption, cling to the newsletter, whatever new success might it might find.

The nexus of Susan, Wursup, and Amy sets up the next phase of the story. The former wife dislikes the stories the younger reporter is producing and the drift of the newsletter into a scandal sheet. She therefore leaks to Wursup a piece her younger colleague is developing; the hope is that Wursup can scoop the newsletter and disseminate the story, thereby robbing it of its impact. By today’s standards, the matter seems laughably inconsequential. Wursup has a long-standing friendship with Jim Doyle, a policy analyst with legislative proposals and political ambitions. It emerges that his father is living in a flophouse in Chicago, where Doyle is hoping to win a congressional seat. Readers in 1976, the year in which the novel is set, apparently considered it dramatically interesting that an authority on urban affairs and welfare economics has a father reflecting the condition he’s proposing to remedy. Wursup interviews the scholar-politician in Rome to air the matter in *The Sunday Times* magazine and deprive Chouinard’s of its exclusive.

The plan backfires badly, however. The principals hoped the piece would take the air out of an incipient scandal and rob it of whatever effect it might have on a congressional campaign. But Wursup's treatment of the material is thoughtless, heavy-handed and includes an offensive citation from *Timon of Athens* that is utterly out of place. The profile joins the forgettable pile of Sunday journalism, but not before it's digested by political kingpins in Chicago. They decide that it reflects poorly on the Machine and quash Doyle's primary campaign.

Francesca Buell returns to the novel, and after visiting her, Wursup finds himself walking north from Lower Manhattan, where the young woman and her circle of friends live, taking in the small retail and other establishments of the neighborhood. "It was four o'clock, icy, granular and sad," Stern writes. "New York was getting ready for the evening. Traffic picked up, salesman added up accounts, cooks poured staples into iron pots, waiters set the evening tables, people thought of subways, drinks, supper, the night's TV programs." Transitory figures like us all, going through their daily routine, and contemplating evening entertainments—alcohol, food, television—that might lift the burden of an unvarying life. This passage always struck me as truly poignant, and it stayed with me long after I had forgotten the rest of the book. The passage is only a few sentences, but it captures an important part of the story. "It is the conviction of

vast number of individuals that they have no proper story,” wrote Saul Bellow decades ago. “Their personal experience of storylessness, and hence of valuelessness, is very greatThey are prepared, but they are not called into action. They feel like unemployed extras.” Perhaps this is why Wursup declares to a close friend in the novel that Francesca, the cancer-stricken girl he is spending time with, “Wants to be a story. You know, to make something out of what’s happening to her.” But a reader following the novel attentively will have doubts about commemorative value of journalism. Francesco will likely join the endless cycle of similar chronicles, her life and death splashed before a fundamentally indifferent readership.

This situation may explain the loose form of the novel and the tepid connections and interactions of the characters. What’s resolved at the end? Wursup is by himself and his former wife is married to a slightly disreputable man. His two sons have wandered out of the story and seem less a part of his life. There is no resolution of the problems of *Chouinard’s*, whose staff, inconsequential to begin with, is uneasy over its greater visibility in the world of journalism. This soup of events concludes with Francesca’s death and the American Bicentennial, and the two parts of the story seem connected: A chronicle of decay and decline alongside a light-hearted commemoration of a birth that matters little to the celebrants.

Wursup, for all his defects, is hardly a monster. The problem is that he so mediocre and average, so representative of his breed. He received an above-average education at Chicago, but hasn't much intellectual appetite. He knows a smattering of foreign languages, but none that he's mastered, and he cannot say if a native speaker of French, German or Spanish (or any language he's picked up) is speaking with any distinction. He is divorced, and though he and the woman he is seeing, sometimes living with, Sookie Gumbert, have pledged mutual loyalty, neither seems to shrink from fresh sexual opportunities on their travels outside of New York. He doesn't seem to feel anything very deeply. Stern writes that "There were glacial rifts in Wursup, when he was as unfeeling as the chemicals which made him." He considers himself an exceptional reporter, but never learns that his closest friend, a classmate from his undergraduate years at Chicago and a publishing house editor, had an affair with Susan that lasted for years. Stern sums up his career, his life, this way:

He'd toss off that article for Mike Schilp now. It was just another verbal turn. A hunk of subject he could turn into a lively piece. Another "How To" piece. How to cook Spaghetti alle Vonghele, How to Make an Outhouse, How to Raise Begonias. . . . Quotes from Epictetus, Hamlet, Einstein, a few squiffs of his own, and Schilp would have another dozen pages of his July issue tucked away, and there'd be another assignment waiting for Wursup, and another, until he felt his own insides curling up one morning and someone saw a little shadow on his tomogramn, and the great parade suddenly came down to one little marcher watched by himself, beating his own brass drum, commemorating nothing but his own departure.

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