☛ **ROBERT FISK** {PAGE 6}

"I had a suspicion that the language we were forced to write as trainee reporters had somehow imprisoned us, that we had been schooled to mould the world and ourselves in clichés, that for the most part this would define our lives, destroy our anger and imagination, make us loyal to our betters, to governments, to authority"

RUI RAMALHEIRO

☛ **TOM NUGENT** {PAGE 3}

"So, quite naturally, I wanted to ask Sinatra all about the President, and all about Grenada, and all about the alleged mobster, and all about the frequent rumors that the U.S. White House and the U.S. Congress and most of the U.S. government were, in fact, controlled by ruthless gangsters"

WRITING WORTH READING ABOUT JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS

NINE ON TEN 4

FAMOUS COUSIN BLUES

South African editor, author and TV personality **Denis Beckett** *has a famous forebear. He's never been quite sure, exactly, what to call old Sam and can't make sense or sausages out of the old boy's plays, but one episode in Paris made him see how a brush with fame can turn the most sophisticated members of our supposedly-civilised society into star-struck groupies* {PAGE 10}

TONY JENKINS

Writing worth reading

Writing worth Reading about Journalism and Journalists. That's the theme of this – and future issues – of NineOnTen which will take advantage of modern Internet technology to ensure more regular distribution in the future.

Starting with this issue, there will only be a few printed copies of each issue of NineOnTen. Instead, the tabloid will be published in downloadable PDF format. This cuts the main costs (and the biggest obstacle to regular publication) involved: printing and mailing.

Let me know what you think of the format, especially the tabloid size, which is inconvenient, I know, for many readers who'll have to tile their copy if they wish to to print and read it off-screen. Perhaps that's a price worth paying: There's no reason why readers shouldn't have to make a little personal effort to enjoy good writing.

Previous issues are also available in PDF format to new readers. Just send an e-mail to me at tonysutton@newsdesign.net and they'll be e-mailed straight away.

Thanks, as always, to the contributors, writers and illustrators, whose work has made this issue of NineOnTen the best yet.

Tony Sutton
Editor

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EDITORIAL AND PUBLICATION DESIGN CONSULTANTS

10469 Sixth Line, RR#3,
Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4S6
Canada

Tel: (905) 702-8600
Fax: (905) 702-8527

E-mail: tonysutton@newsdesign.net

Website:
www.newsdesign.net

DAVID ANDERSON

MEDIA BEAT

NOAM CHOMSKY – SAYING WHAT MEDIA DON'T WANT US TO HEAR

Even when the brickbats are flying, America's biggest media critic just won't keep his head down, says **Norman Solomon**

If liberty means anything at all," George Orwell wrote, "it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

From all indications, the gatekeepers for big media in the United States don't want to hear what Noam Chomsky has to say – and they'd prefer that we not hear him either.

Mainstream journalists in other nations often interview Chomsky. Based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he's a world-renowned analyst of propaganda and global politics. But the chances are slim that you'll ever find him on a large network here at home.

Chomsky is ill-suited to providing soundbites – and that's not just a matter of style. A few snappy words are sufficient when they harmonize with the conventional wisdom in a matter of seconds. It takes longer to intelligibly present a very different assessment of political realities.

No one disputes that Chomsky revolutionized the study of language more than 40 years ago. The rich and powerful have no quarrel with his work as the world's most significant linguist. But as a political analyst, he's pretty much persona non grata at big U.S. networks and influential dailies.

Meanwhile, overflow audiences of thousands are routine when Chomsky speaks on college campuses and elsewhere in the United States. For many years now, community radio stations across North America have featured his speeches and interviews on political subjects. Progressive magazines publish his articles.

But at major media outlets, most editors seem far more interested in facile putdowns of Chomsky than in allowing space for his own words. Media attacks on him are especially vitriolic in times of international crisis and war.

Since Sept. 11, the distortions have been predictable: Although he's an unequivocal opponent of terrorism in all its forms, Chomsky is portrayed as an apologist for terrorism. Although he's a consistent advocate of human rights for all, Chomsky is accused of singling out the U.S. government for blame.

To some extent, Chomsky seems to bring the media salvos on himself. Even when the brickbats are flying, the guy just won't keep his head down. He speaks bluntly when the Pentagon terrorizes faraway civilians in the name of fighting terrorism. And he points out that citizens of the most powerful country on Earth have special responsibilities to work against deadly policies implemented in their names with their tax dollars.

Chomsky's latest book, titled "9-11," has arrived in bookstores. It's a collection of interviews, serving as a badly needed corrective to news coverage of the present-day "war on terrorism."

The book will be very useful in the months to come. Yet "9-11" just scratches the surface. For those who want more depth, many superb Chomsky books are available — including the classic study "Manufacturing Consent" (co-authored with Edward S. Herman), "Profit Over People" and "The New Military Humanism," as well as volumes of interviews conducted by David Barsamian.

In "9-11," Chomsky speaks without evasion: "We should recognize that in much of the world the U.S. is regarded as a leading terrorist state, and with good reason." Chomsky cites many examples of U.S. actions that resulted in the killing of several million civilians during the past few decades. A partial list of nations where those deaths have occurred includes Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, East Timor, Sudan, Iraq, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

All in the past? Chomsky rips into the scam of wiping the U.S. government's slate clean. "If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion," he said. "Or we can look at recent history, at the institutional structures that remain essentially unchanged, at the plans that are being announced – and answer the questions accordingly. I know of no reason to suppose that there has been a sudden change in long-standing motivations or policy goals, apart from tactical adjustments to changing circumstances."

Chomsky added wryly: "We should also remember that one exalted task of intellectuals is to proclaim every few years that we have 'changed course,' the past is behind us and can be forgotten as we march on towards a glorious future. That is a highly convenient stance, though hardly an admirable or sensible one."

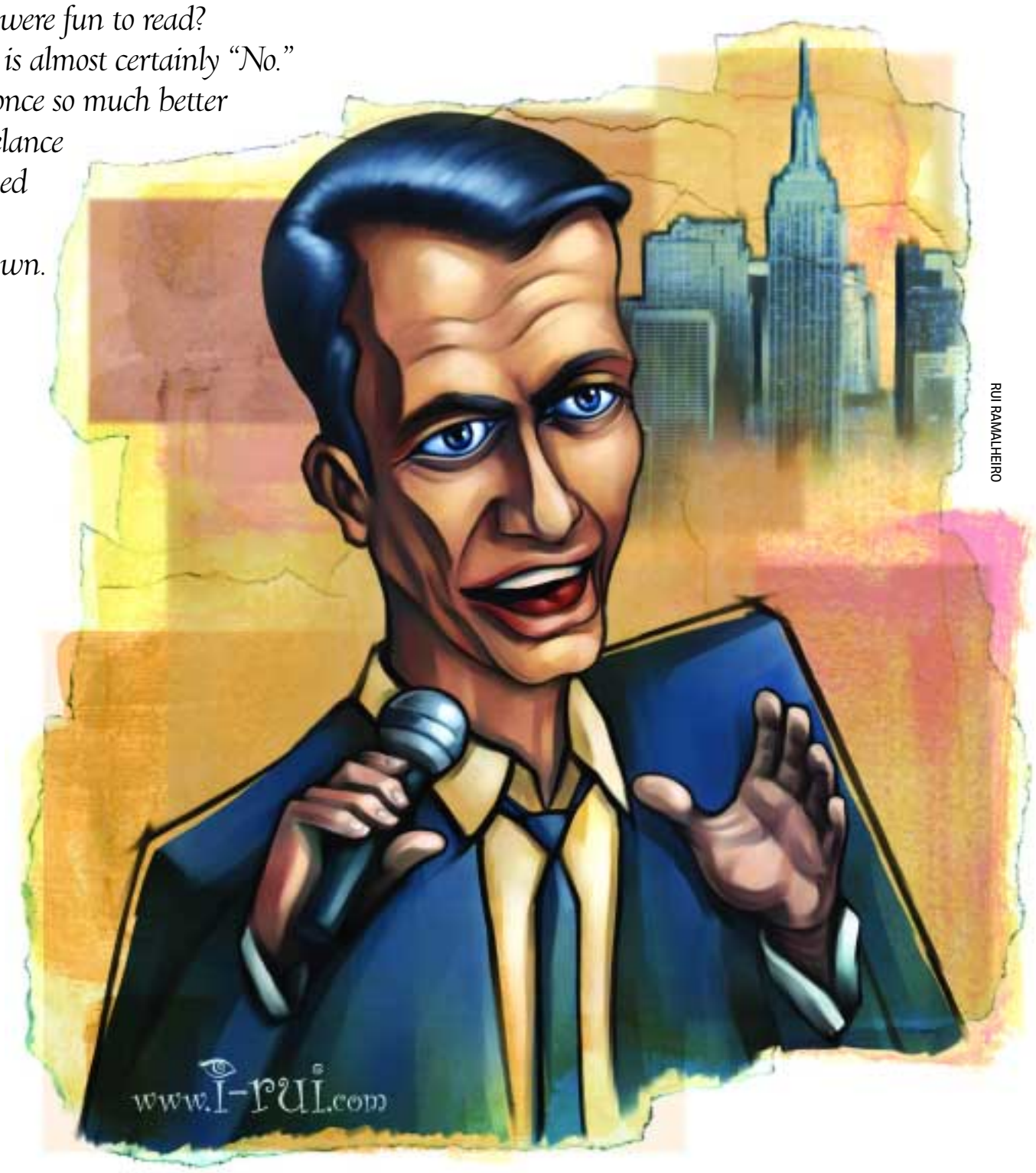
For those whose window on the world is mostly confined to mainstream U.S. media, some of Chomsky's statements may seem odd or absolutely wrong. But you can't make an informed judgment based on a few quotes. Read a couple of Chomsky's books and decide for yourself.

Noam Chomsky is not a lone ranger or ivory tower intellectual. For decades, he has worked closely with grassroots activists.

"Understanding doesn't come free," he commented a few years ago. "It's true that the task is somewhere between awfully difficult and utterly hopeless for an isolated individual. But it's feasible for anyone who is part of a cooperative community." And, he added, understanding the world "doesn't help anyone else, or oneself very much either for that matter, unless it leads to action." ●

Norman Solomon's latest book is The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media. His syndicated column, Media Beat, focuses on media and politics.

Remember when newspapers were fun to read? If you're under 40, the answer is almost certainly "No." One reason why papers were once so much better is this: Guys like Baltimore freelance writer **Tom Nugent,** *who worked at The Baltimore Sun when it wasn't the Only Paper In Town. Here's a story from one of those heady days*



RUI RAMALHEIRO

I WAS SHOT DOWN BY FRANK SINATRA

We were strolling along a ramp at the Long Island Coliseum – Frank Sinatra and I – when all at once the famous crooner began to bellow angrily. "Hey! Hey! Who is this guy? Who is this guy?"

As if by magic, three huge men suddenly appeared at my elbow. Their coats bulged with obvious guns, and they did not look happy to see me.

I did my best to ignore them.

"Mr. Sinatra," I said, pressing ahead with my newspaper interview, "you've always been a strong supporter of Ronald Reagan…"

"Who is this guy?"

"In the wake of the Grenada invasion," I said, "I wonder if you could tell us …"

But now the gunmen were upon me.

It was pretty clear that they didn't want me to interview Mr. Sinatra anymore.

"Right this way, sir …"

They began to bump me with their large, padded shoulders.

A doorway opened on the right side of the ramp – more magic … and within a few seconds, the gunmen were "bumping" me through it.

Sinatra glared back at me for a moment.

"I didn't come here," barked Ol' Blue Eyes, "to talk politics with you!"

A moment later, the door slammed shut. Now I stood in a patch of dripping weeds. Rain fell on my face.

I had just been booted out of the Long Island Coliseum.

End of interview.

Everybody knew that you couldn't interview Frank Sinatra. He hated reporters, because they keep trying to ask him questions about his alleged "underworld connections," and about his interesting relationships with such unsavory figures as former Maryland Governor and U.S. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, a convicted criminal.

But I tried. I did.

It happened back in the spring of 1984. I was working as a feature writer at the Washington Times, in those days – having recently resigned from a similar post at the "Whore of Babylon" (the Baltimore Sun), where the daily, cringing censorship of any news that didn't protect the "Baltimore Establishment" had become unbearable.

Anyway, Sinatra was coming to Washington – back in the spring of '84 – to receive some sort of grotesque "national citizenship award" at the Kennedy Center.

The editors at the Times wanted to "profile" the fabled crooner, and then run the piece on the day of the award.

"You'll have to write the profile from clips," the feature editor told me, "since Sinatra doesn't give interviews."

"Let me try," I said.

"You'll only get shot down."

"Let me try!"

The editor frowned, blinked, and scratched his head.

"Go for it," he said.

Is there any joy like the joy of getting "shot down" on an interview, and then getting booted out into a rainstorm?

After 20 years of writing features for newspapers and magazines all across America, I've become addicted to the "adrenalin rush" that takes place whenever you try for an impossible interview.

I also love the "rush" that begins the moment you ask a real question (as opposed to a horseshit, Sunpapers "PR-question") of a major celebrity.

I can't forget the immense joy, for example, of asking Henry Kissinger (back in the late 1970's) why he secretly bombed Cambodia for 18 months, at the height of the Vietnam War.

(His answer: "Dere … dere vass no secret bombink of Cambodia – and your kahvestion shows dis-respeck!")

I can't forget the joy of asking former President Gerald Ford, back in early 1980, if Ronald Reagan, given his "apparent intellectual limitations," was "smart enough to be President."

(His answer: "Well, he's no Phi Beta Kappa … but I think he's smart enough to get the job done.")

And I can't forget the huge thrill of asking that famed and magnificently mustachioed Watergate burglar, G. Gordon Liddy, why he had broken the law for Richard Nixon.

(His answer, after insisting that he'd done the deed for "national security," and warning that the Soviets were intent on takeover: "It's not Charlie the Tuna out there in that water, pal – it's Jaws!")

The first thing I did, after deciding to interview Sinatra, was to call the PR-guy at the Long Island Coliseum. (Ol' Blue Eyes, as it turned out, would be performing at

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

FROM PAGE 3

the Coliseum that very evening, and the joint was sold out.)

The PR-guy sounded a little uptight on the phone. Surprisingly, however, he told me that if I showed up, he'd try to help me get an interview with Ol' Blue Eyes.

"If he's in a good mood, I might be able to get you ten minutes, right before the show."

Ten minutes with the Ol' Blue Eyes?

That was all I needed to hear.

I grabbed a tape recorder and notebook and ran for Penn Station.

Arriving in New York City, I took a commuter train to Long Island, and then had to catch two different buses to reach the Coliseum.

It was raining like hell. Soaked, I fought my way across swamped Long Island potato fields to the giant steel doughnut – the Coliseum – which serves as headquarters for the Islanders pro hockey team. The arena was already packed; 20,000 matrons from New Jersey were already screaming and wetting themselves in their $25 seats.

Head down, teeth bared, I fought my way to the PR office, and picked up a "pass" that would admit me into the bowels of the arena.

But when I reached the PR-guy's office, I found him cowering behind his desk.

"Sorry!" he snapped, the moment I introduced myself. "But you can't interview him – he's cranky!"

My face fell. "I just came all the way from Baltimore …"

"Nothing I can do," he cut me off, with gathering panic visible in his eyes. "Don't you understand, he's cranky?"

"Where is he now?"

Tom Nugent: "So, quite naturally, I wanted to ask Sinatra all about the President, and all about the alleged mobsters, and all about the frequent rumours that the White House and the U.S. Congress and most of the U.S. government were, in fact, controlled by ruthless gangsters …"

The PR-guy rose to his feet.

"He's right down the hall, at a champagne reception. But you can't go in there … I tell you, he's cranky!"

"I'm going to give it a try," I said. Then I turned away and headed for the reception.

"No!" The PR-guy ran out from behind the desk. His face was white as chalk. His eyes swam with terror. "You can't! Forget it! Cranky!"

I was already walking down the hallway . . . past the pro hockey locker room . . . all the way to a banquet room marked: SINATRA RECEPTION.

The door was open. I could see Ol' Blue Eyes standing at the head of a champagne-laden table, greeting a line of important people who moved slowly past him. Most of the men in the room were bald, with pencil-thin mustaches – they looked like they all ran major car-crushing operations in Bayonne.

There were also at least a dozen beautiful blonde women milling around Sinatra . . . and every one of those beauties was at least six inches taller than I was.

I gulped with fear. Adrenalin!

I had reached the secret heart of the American Dream – the place where they kept the money, and the guns, and the good Scotch whisky, and the taller women.

The reception was breaking up!

My guts roiled with stark, animal fear.

Then a thunderous drum roll, somewhere far above my head, announced that they were beginning to introduce Frankie.

Hovering at my elbow, the PR-guy moaned with terror. His job was on the line, and he knew it. "You can't do this! I can't let you do this! Don't you realize –"

But it was too late.

The Sinatra entourage was upon us.

Without hesitating, I fell into step beside him. "Mr. Sinatra," I said brightly, "I want to be the first to welcome you to Washington, next week, for your award at the Kennedy Center!"

He glared at me suspiciously, but shook my hand.

Together, we began walking down the hallway toward the ramp that would take him out to the arena, where the 20,000 New Jersey matrons were at that moment going insane.

I began to ask him my question about President Reagan. Sinatra, after all, was a lifelong pal of the President, and the two of them had often been seen together. Only a few years before, in fact, they had been photographed at a posh wedding… along with a man described by the newspapers as a "major organized crime figure" from California.

So, quite naturally, I wanted to ask Sinatra all about the President, and all about Grenada, and all about the alleged mobster, and all about the frequent rumors that the U.S. White House and the U.S. Congress and most of the U.S. government were, in fact, controlled by ruthless gangsters. . .

But then Ol' Blue Eyes began to bellow.

"Who is this guy?"

We were on the ramp now – Sinatra and I – headed toward the giant, weaving spotlights up ahead.

The Coliseum shook with thunder, as the 20,000 New Jersey matrons reached showbiz orgasm, and then the announcer roared:

AND NOW … THE MAN YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR … OL' BLUE EYES!

But at that moment the gunmen arrived, the door slammed open, and I was suddenly standing in a patch of weeds, with rain falling in my face. . . .

It took me three hours – and two more buses – to fight my way back to New York City. Soaked to the skin again, I finally managed to rent a hotel room, where I could sit down and "transcribe" my notes.

Those notes, I soon discovered, consisted of two sentences.

"Who is this guy?"

"I didn't come here to talk politics with you!"

But I felt terrific!

It was brief … there was no denying that. But the fact remained: I had gotten an interview! I had Frank Sinatra on tape!

Was there any joy like it?

AMERICA'S MEDIA DECLARES WAR – ON JOURNALISM

Columnist **Del Stone** *takes a satirical look at how New Journalism invaded the front page ...*

It couldn't happen here. For decades Americans have watched mayhem overseas, smugly confident their shores were safe from chaos. Sept. 11, 2001 changed that.

We're talking about journalism, of course.

While American media rushed to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, members of the foreign press – long the butt of ridicule by their counterparts in North America – shook their heads in wonder at jingoistic coverage, timid media mouthpieces parroting government press releases, media "celebrities" and "talking heads" greedily chasing the spotlight, drama queens playing to the gooshy gush of Hollywood tropes and clichés, and an uncharacteristic reluctance at self-reflection.

William Randolph Hearst meets "Where the Buffalo Roam." Consider the following – exaggerated for your reading pleasure:

Headline: Sons-of-bitches blow up World Trade Center.

Flash: American newspapers print their 10,184th picture of a sad person clutching a candle with respectfully bowed head.

Press pool question for Gen. Tommy Franks, who commands Operation Enduring Freedom: "For the 10,184th time, Gen. Franks, when will this war end? Frankly the whole thing is becoming boring."

Flash: Journalists provide al Qaida with cameras and equipment so they can receive statements from the group. Al Qaida says a few cameras and equipment won't be enough. "If you really want a statement from Al Qaida, cough up some real equipment," says an Al Qaida spokesman, identified only as "Joe."

Flash: After ABC and NBC receive anthrax-infected letters, Dan Rather threatens to file suit.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is "heating up."

Question for Gen. Franks: "Will you be sure to let us know when you've captured Osama bin Laden?"

Flash: Arabs say videotapes that allegedly prove Osama bin Laden's involvement in the planning of the Sept. 11 attacks were faked by Rob Lowe.

Headline: America vows to get the dirty bastards who blew up the WTC.

Flash: Israel attacks Palestinian targets following suicide bombings that leave several people dead. As the United States bombs Afghanistan into the Stone Age, it urges Israel to show restraint. Editorial writers excoriate Israel for cowboy diplomacy.

Flash: Journalists provide al Qaida with Happy Meals and the entire first season of "The X-Files" on DVD. Al Qaida says more is needed if journalists want to get the "full story."

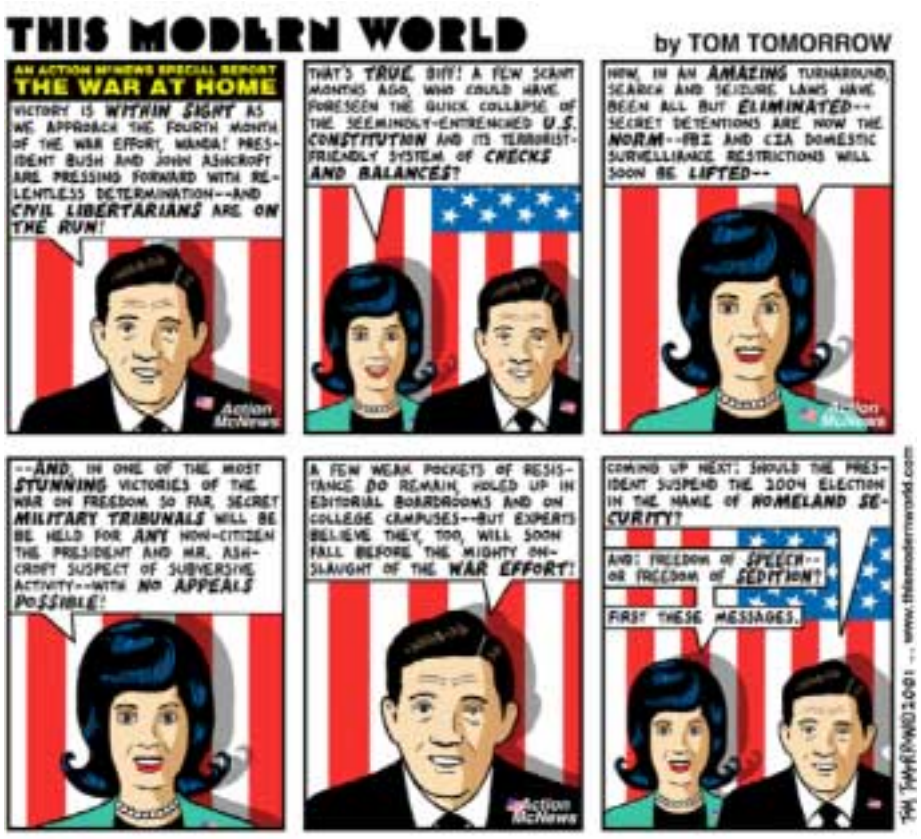
Flash: Somebody finally sends CBS some anthrax. Dan Rather bravely refuses to be tested, prompting at-risk patients, from potential AIDS sufferers to kids with strep throat, to snub clinics in droves.

Flash: A commemorative plate featuring the likeness of a sad person clutching a candle and bowing his head respectfully is advertised for only $24.95, plus shipping and handling.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is "really, really hot now."

Flash: A helpful scrawl across the bottom of the CNN screen provides viewers with the URL for bin Laden's Web site, www.deathtoamerica.com, where visitors can sign his guestbook, view a streamed denunciation of Western infidels, play a video game of airplanes and skyscrapers, and even use a nifty image archive of possible disguises for Uncle Osama.

Flash: The U.S. government denies faking the bin Laden video, saying its transcript of the tape was provided by Mrs. Nelly's fourth-grade students at Ibson Elementary School in Schenectady, N.Y., as part of a class Internet translation site project. The kids receive trophies on



"Good Morning America."

Flash: News media make big honkin' deal out of "humanitarian aid" being dumped on Afghanistan – Pop Tarts and peanut butter, which are fed to camels or sold at firesale prices on the black market.

Question for Gen. Franks: "What's your favorite color?"

Flash: Journalists provide al Qaida with surface-to-air Stinger missiles. Al Qaida spokesmen say, "Now you're talking '60 Minutes.' "

Flash: Millions tune in to the CBS Evening News to see if Dan Rather's nose has fallen off.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is "so hot you can't touch it with an oven mitt in the shape of a trout."

Flash: The bin Laden video wins at Cannes.

Headline: "Kill! Kill! Kill!" Girl Scouts chant at White House pep rally

Flash: Tons and tons of humanitarian aid pelt from the skies in Afghanistan. Back home, a mysterious shortage of Count Chocula and AOL Version 8.0 startup discs prompts an investigative series by USA Today, which follows up with this story: Has the stress of 9/11 made Americans fatter? Rack sales explode.

Flash: American spy plane downed, possibly by a Stinger missile. Journalists ask a Pentagon spokesman, "Where the heck did al Qaida got its hands on a Stinger missile?"

Flash: Dan Rather gets strep throat.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is getting "colder, colder – warmer, warmer – colder – warmer – warmer. ..."

Question for Gen. Franks: "What's your opinion of 'Lord of the Rings' – and please be specific."

Flash: Bin Laden is spotted on a box of Wheaties.

Flash: The media dutifully report the tonnage of "humanitarian aid" dropped in Afghanistan. Afghan camels get fat and develop tooth decay and cardiac problems. The military proposes air drops of toothpaste and phen-fen.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is somewhere between "hell and hell freezing over."

Flash: *Gulf News* says fighting over the spelling of "Al Qaida" has caused it economic hardships beyond its ability to manage and asks Congress for a bailout similar to the one granted the airline industry.

Flash: Pop Tarts and jars of peanut butter mysteriously fall from the sky in Topeka, Kansas, causing a stampede that leaves 42 people hospitalized.

Flash: A crazed homeless person confronts Dan Rather on the street and shouts, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" Rather shouts back, "What is this? Some kind of test? Don't you watch TV? I DON'T TAKE TESTS!"

Headline: Oprah could "just slap" bin Laden.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden is about as hot as the hunt for a new angle to this story.

Flash: Humanitarian aid drops of new Xbox game cartridges over Afghanistan cause teen-agers in Tokyo and Los Angeles to declare jihad.

Flash: AP and Reuters say if *Gulf News* receives a bailout, they too deserve a bailout. The LA *Times* wire refuses a bailout, claiming its expenses are underwritten by income generated by sports center ad revenue. KRT threatens to raise the specter of the spelling of "Khadafy."

Headline: Small town America declares, "If We See One More Fucking Picture of Somebody Clutching a Candle and Bowing Their Head Respectfully, We Are Just Going to Puke."

Flash: The Taliban demands to be featured on MTV's "The Real World," so the "real story" of the Afghan fundamentalist government can be told. "We are innocent as lambs," Mullah Omar tells Carson Daly. "We help old ladies cross the street (if they wearing the traditional chador. If not, we help them halfway across). We bake sheep eyeball cookies, and hold singalongs. We are not evil. We are misunderstood."

Flash: Peter Jennings and Tom Brokaw receive letters tainted with lethal concentrations of Stetson cologne. Dan Rather fumes that his letter must have been lost in the mail.

Flash: Mainstream America vows to kill the next headline writer who uses the word "heal."

Flash: A class-action suit filed on behalf of sad people clutching candles and bowing their heads respectfully seeks cash from the government for the stress these people have suffered since 9/11.

Flash: Journalists report the hunt for bin Laden has been expanded to include the audience of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

Flash: American C-17 cargo jets dump pallets of hundred-dollar bills over Kabul. Media "experts" say this "injection of capital" should jump-start a new wave of entrepreneurs and small businessmen in Afghanistan, who will renounce opium poppies for selling Pop Tarts and peanut butter on the black market.

Headline: War Produces Surplus of Clichés – Grammarians Declare Open Season on "Hunt for Bin Laden Heating Up," "War on Terror," "American Forces Pound," "Shocking Events Unfold," and "Now for This Commercial Break."

Del Stone Jr. is the assistant managing editor of a daily newspaper in Florida. ail him at delstonejr@yahoo.com.

The London Independent's award-winning Middle East correspondent **Robert Fisk** *learned his trade on a British regional evening newspaper. Here, he returns to his old patch and uncovers some dark truths - about stories never reported, and a culture of cliché from which journalists struggle to escape*

"I DIDN'T THINK OUR READERS WERE THAT DUMB. I THOUGHT THEY MIGHT LIKE SOMETHING MORE THAN OUR CLICHES. BUT NOT ACCORDING TO OUR JOURNALISM TEACHERS"

I was 17 when I first arrived in Newcastle upon Tyne. It was a city of heavy, black, 19th-century buildings, a spider's web of iron bridges and smouldering steam locomotives, the air thick with coal smoke and red haze from the steel works at Consett. The news editor of the *Evening Chronicle,* John Brownlee, did his best to cheer me up. "You'll be in our Blyth office, Bob, a bustling little coal town on the coast with plenty of life and lots of news." Brownlee was in estate-agent mode. Blyth was a down-at-heel collier harbour, smothered in the dust of doomed mines and a thousand coal fires. The slagheaps glowed red at night, the dying shipyards were bankrupt, pools of vomit lay splashed over the pavements outside the "Blyth and Tyne" and two dozen other pubs and clubs every Sunday morning. Even in summer, a kind of North Sea mildew settled over the town, a damp, cold cloth mixed with coal smoke that smothered all who lived there.

I was home-sick and lonely and I was paid £17.50 a week, a third of which I handed over to Mrs Hamilton, my landlady at 82 Middleton Street, where I slept in a room 7ft in length and just 5ft wide with a single, tiny gas fire. When I came home one day, I found the Gas Board asking my landlady why there was no money in the meter; I had to explain that I didn't earn enough to pay for the heating. So I spent all evening in front of the fire in the rotting old back-to-back *Chronicle* office in Seaforth Street, then walked home through the smoke at midnight and cowered under my blankets for warmth. On Sunday afternoons, I used to read history books – wrapped in a heavy overcoat – on a seat in the overgrown Victorian beach garden near the port.

But there were stories. I shared my digs with the gloriously named Captain Fortune, deputy harbour-master of Blyth, whose moment of glory arrived when a Cold War Polish fishing-fleet put into port during a storm. And stayed. And stayed. When Fortune boarded the first trawler to demand its immediate departure, the Polish captain slapped him round the face with a massive, sharp-finned fish. I warned readers that the Victorian wooden staithes from which freight trains would unload coal into the colliers were in danger of collapse. I staggered through feet of water deep under the Tyne to watch two teams of miners hack their way through to each other in the first stage of what was to be Newcastle's first under-river motorway. I catalogued the massive overspending on Blyth's spanking new power station. I recorded the classical learning of the Blyth town clerk as he used quotations from mythology to defeat motorway extension objectors. The Golden Fleece was on his tongue. When the Council failed, its plans were – of course – "put on ice."

"The best stories could be told in 400 words, we were told. All the facts in the first para, plenty of punchy lines, equal time to all parties in a dispute and a good 'kicker.' No anger, no passion, no suggestion that there was right or wrong"

And I covered the courts. Some cases were truly pathetic. There was the mother whose son, a Morpeth male nurse, died hanging from the back of his hospital bedroom door; she wailed outside the court as officials gently explained to her that her son had stood on a pile of books with a noose round his neck to "stimulate sexual glands." The books had slid apart and the boy had been left choking to death on the door. Then there was the teenager arrested for stealing a toaster from his grandparents. They wanted him imprisoned. His real "crime," it quickly turned out, was that he was homosexual – "indecency with a male" was our journalistic cliché – and he was swiftly remanded. On his way out, he made a pass at the most senior policeman in all Blyth.

And we wrote in clichés. Always clichés. When the police were seeking a hit-and-run driver, they either "spread their net" or "narrowed their search" or "stepped up their hunt." Company directors were "bosses," scientists were invariably "boffins," officials were always "chiefs," storm-battered ships inevitably "limped" into port. Suicides were always tragic, brides always beautiful, angry councillors were "hopping mad" and protesting villagers would always "take to the streets." Those who discovered bodies were, of course, "horror-struck" or "mystified"; the latter applied to the construction gang building a new Blyth bypass who excavated dozens of corpses – all in their Victorian Sunday best – and thought they'd discovered a mass murder before realising they were digging up an old cemetery. Needless to say, Tory election candidates always "lashed out" at the sitting Labour MP, Eddie Blythe.

They actually taught us to write like this. There was a whole Thomson school of journalism in Newcastle which I and my fellow "cub" reporters from other *Chronicle* district offices were ordered to attend once a week – much to the disgust of my senior reporter in Blyth, Jim Harland, a Sean Connery lookalike with a reservoir of immense kindness and – for really stupid reporters – volcanic anger. "You learn journalism on the job, not listening to that bunch of wankers," Harland once told me. But sure enough, every Thursday morning, I'd arrive in Newcastle on a pre-war double-decker bus from Blyth – the interior filled with a suffocating fog of blue cigarette smoke – wolf down an egg sandwich at the aptly named "Rumbling Tum" café and endure hours of shorthand, legal advice and clichés.

The best stories could be told in 400 words, we were told. All the facts in the first para, plenty of punchy lines, equal time to all parties in a dispute and a good "kicker." No anger, no passion, no suggestion that there was right or wrong. I was reminded of Joe Friday in Dragnet. "Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts," he'd yell at the broads. We were given "story-lines." Write the intro to the following: a retired soldier – who once took part in the Normandy landings – was blaming the local council because his wife had disappeared after seeing a ghost in her council-supplied house. Answer: "A mystified D-Day vet lashed out at council chiefs last night after his terrified wife fled 'phantoms' in their council home." Anything that moved away from this rubric, that suggested a more subtle, nuanced approach – perhaps the old soldier was suffering

RUI RAMALHEIRO

from shell-shock or his wife was mentally ill or perhaps the ghosts were real – was wiped out.

Our Thomson "trainers" quickly decided that a reporter called Simon Winchester would never make the grade. He was too imaginative, too thoughtful, too critical in his approach. Simon, of course, went on to become the best *Guardian* correspondent in Belfast. We were supposed to write stories the readers would easily "understand." Readers were in a hurry, tired, often not well educated, we were taught. Having talked for hours to miners and part-time shipyard workers and firemen and cops and landladies, I didn't think our readers were that dumb. I thought they might like something more than our clichés. But not according to the journalism teachers. We had to have "key" words. Lash out. Bosses. Phantoms. Chiefs. Terrified.

Yes, we had to be "trained." I still remember the guffaws of our "Stop Press" printer in the Blyth office when he read my report of a launching in the local shipyard by the wife of the chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board. "Mrs Smith smashed the Champagne against the hull of the vessel," I had written, "and the workers cheered as she slid down the slipway." Then there was the Tory election candidate who, in my interview, "smiled as he spoke of his many and varied pastimes." Harland collapsed. "You're a fucking innocent, Bob," he screamed. "What do you think our readers will make of 'many and varied pastimes'?"

But I also remember what the *Chronicle* didn't say. My reference to the weeping mother outside the Morpeth coroner's inquest was cut from the story. The tale of Captain Fortune's fish never made it – the paper needed a quote from the long-departed Polish trawler captain to "balance" the story. My report on the dangerous state of Blyth staithes was followed by a formal apology to the National Coal Board – inserted by *Chronicle* editors without any reference to me – to the effect that the wooden pier met all safety standards. A wolfish smile crossed my face weeks later when a roar of splintering wood and exploding steam shook the Blyth office. A tank engine – its driver mercifully unhurt – had crashed down through the flimsy old pit-props and settled precariously on the edge of the dock. We reported it straight – no reference to my previous story, nor to the grovelling apology we had carried only weeks earlier.

I had nothing against the *Chron*. When Liverpool University offered me a place to read English, the editors cheerfully accepted my resignation and wished me luck in my studies. When Liverpool then unforgivably decided that – without O-level maths – they couldn't after all give me the promised place, John Brownlee equally cheerfully offered me my job back. Then when Lancaster gave me a real undergraduate place, Brownlee sent me off again with his best wishes. He later wrote me a stunning reference for the Sunday Express which impressed its late, irascible editor, John Junor. Harland overrode my desire to stay on the paper. "Don't be a fucking eejit," the coal miner's son solemnly told me. "Go do your studies, Bob, and get a degree."

Which is what I did. Within months, I was studying linguistics and reading Chomsky and learning, thanks to David Craig's English lectures on Dickens, of the social devastation which the Industrial Revolution had spread across northern England, indeed across the very area where I had been a cub reporter. The decaying mines, the growing unemployment, the doomed shipyards – even the rotten wood of the Blyth staithes – suddenly made sense. But I had to go to university to understand this. Journalism was about history. But not in the *Chron*.

"For some reason, I had become possessed of the belief that the blame for our failure as journalists to report the Middle East with any sense of moral passion or indignation lay in the way that we as journalists were trained"

And in the end, it was this thought – the idea that language and history shape our lives – that lured me back this month to the north-east of England. I had a suspicion that the language we were forced to write as trainee reporters all those years ago had somehow imprisoned us, that we had been schooled to mould the world and ourselves in clichés, that for the most part this would define our lives, destroy our anger and imagination, make us loyal to our betters, to governments, to authority. For some reason, I had become possessed of the belief that the blame for our failure as journalists to report the Middle East with any sense of moral passion or indignation lay in the way that we as journalists were trained.

When I returned, a cold, heavy rain was falling across Blyth. The old harbour was a dark, mud-sided, empty lagoon. There were no more shipyards. The mines had closed – all but one pit up the coast – and the power station, glowering through the murk on the other side of the river, had been decommissioned. At the end of Middleton Street, the newsagent – grills on the windows, damp stains covering the ceiling – told me Blyth was still dying. "Fourteen per cent unemployment, 34 drug deaths in four years," he said. "No future." I bought the *Chron*. The wooden staithes had disappeared. So had the railway. The beach garden where I used to read was still there, its curved stone balustrade broken and collapsing into the sand.

I knocked on the door of number 82. My landlady, Mrs Hamilton, was long gone. The couple who lived there now allowed me to climb the stairs, turn right at the top and push open the little cubby-hole where I slept almost 40 years ago. Seven-by-five. I hadn't got the measurements wrong. There were bookshelves in the room now, newly painted, centrally heated, the old gas-pipe concealed within the wall. The room where I had eaten my bacon breakfasts – Mrs Hamilton provided full board – contained a magnificent marble fireplace which I could not remember. The new owners of number 82 were – they were the first to proclaim the fact and I saw the proof on the living room table – *Independent* readers. They never bought the *Chronicle*. Was there, I wondered, a message here?

In the car, the rain guttering down the windscreen, the same old grey streets shimmering through the glass, I opened the *Chronicle*. Nothing had changed. All that follows came from one single issue. "Bosses leading a management buyout of stricken shipyard Cammell Laird say a £2m damages claim from former workers could scupper the bid." Key words: Bosses. Stricken. Scupper. Bid. "A pair of high-flyers will be winging their way to France for the most gruelling cycle race in the world." Key words: High-flyers. Gruelling. "A mum of three who lured a teenage girl babysitter into a seedy sex session with a stranger she met through an internet chatroom has failed in her bid to cut her jail term." Lured. Seedy. Bid. "Jet-away MPs have been condemned for heading off on foreign jaunts rather than holidaying in the North-east to help the region's ailing tourist industry." Sympathetic though I was to the MPs as I glanced at the weather grizzling down outside my car, I got the message: Jet-away. Jaunts. Ailing. "Police hunting the murderer of Sara Cameron have spread their net abroad." Yes, well over 30 years since I'd been writing this crap, the cops were still "spreading their net" and – I had little doubt – would soon be "narrowing their search" or "stepping up" their hunt for Sara's killer. It was left to the successor of the old weekly *Blyth News* – now a free-sheet with the immortal title of the *News Post Leader* – to tell me that "plans to build a housing estate on scrubland in Blyth Valley have been put on ice ..."

I drove to Morpeth to see the old magistrates court, and Gateshead, and back and forth over the Tyne bridges where I once had my picture taken in a waistcoat, and I found that the Rumbling Tum was now part of an underground bus station, that the slag-heaps had been largely "greened," that the smoke had gone. Yes, that great, greasy, wet smoke that I breathed day and night – even in my unheated bedroom – had vanished. Perhaps smokeless coal and gas has its advantages. Or, as I grimly thought, perhaps there's nothing left to burn.

Jim Harland was leaning over his front wall when I drove up. Plumper, a little jowelled, eyes sharp as coals,

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FROM PAGE 7

Sean Connery features still in evidence, along with his tongue. "You're the man who missed the story in Blyth port on your day off," he growled. The sun had come out. He had set up the annual town fair and today – deus ex machina – was town fair day. There was a fire engine and pin-bowling and pop-singing and dancing by a team of overweight cuties in old US army uniforms – I'm still puzzling the meaning of that one – and a ball-in-the-tub throwing session (which Fisk lost) and an awful lot of very tough-looking mums and dads with sallow faces and sad smiles and, I thought, a life of great hardship behind them. Blyth, Harland told me, was becoming a great dormitory town for Newcastle. Pity they'd torn up the railway. But the sleeping bit I could well understand.

Harland is a big man, "Big Jim Harland," we used to call him – he went on in later years to work for *The Mirror*, then the BBC – and he propelled me towards the Federation Club where pints moved like quicksilver around a room where huge ex-miners and ex-shipyard men kept winning all kinds of bingo games. I had never seen so many £5 notes. Life had been good to Harland and his wife Rosemary and we walked back to his home – just across from my old "digs" – for lunch. "Space was the problem for us in journalism, Bob," he said. "I was taught at 16 that you had to economise on space. We couldn't write 'Mrs S, who was 23 years old'; I had to write '23-year-old Mrs S'. But if we said what we thought, well, we'd have called that bias. We could say 'this is what I saw' but not 'this is what I feel I saw'. The journalists who trained us were regional journalists – and they taught us what they knew, the way they had been trained."

Robert Fisk: "Why write about the Blyth staithes if we're going to carry a Coal Board denial? Why write about the outrageous nature of Israel's killing of stone-throwing children if we're going to get outraged letters to the editor?"

"Well over 30 years since I'd been writing this crap, the cops were still 'spreading their net' and – I had little doubt – would soon be 'narrowing their search' or 'stepping up' their hunt for Sara's killer"

But slowly, as Rosemary made the lunch in the kitchen, Harland revealed more about Blyth. He thought former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and miners' union leader Arthur Scargill had done most harm to the town. But he knew much that I had not known when I worked there. The town clerk who had been such a classical scholar – he had lived near my digs but was now long dead – had been on the make. The police chief – the man who was the target of the gay man in the court but now also dead – had been in the habit of ringing up landlords in the early hours of the morning for a drink, forcing them to open their pubs at 6am for the local, newly off-duty, cops. "No, we didn't write this," Harland said. "These people fed us. They'd help us. The policeman who'd want an early morning drink would also tip us off on stories. We had to talk to everyone, the town clerk, the police, the fire brigade ... Then there was child abuse. There was a lot of it here. A terrible thing. But the social services wouldn't talk to us. They said all their enquiries were confidential, that we didn't have the right to know what they had learnt. And so child abuse went on. I only realised the state of things when a cricketer I knew made a comment about his daughters and I realised it was a common thing. But we accept the 'privacy' of the social services. And in court, we reported 'indecency with a minor'. Those were the words we used."

I asked about the Middle East. Did Harland think that perhaps our "training" had caused us to fail when we journalists were faced not with local government disputes or coroners' courts but with a great historical tragedy? "I've never covered a story that was a great tragedy like the Middle East," he said. "I can see the problem, yes. How do you make the journalism here stretch to the journalism there?" He had made the point precisely.

For out in the Middle East, more and more journalists, each with their local reporting experience, their "training," their journalism schools – the American version being even more banal than the English ones – are using clichés and tired adjectives to obscure reality. Turn on your television tonight or read tomorrow's agency reports and we are told of the "cycle of violence" – no side taken there – of "clashes" (in which the identities of victim and killer are obscured) or of "the fears of Israeli security chiefs." Note how the word "security" is always linked to the word "Israel." And how "chiefs" has made the grade from Blyth to Palestine. And just as the police chief in Blyth would tip us off on a story, so Israelis – to a much lesser extent Palestinians – tip us off on stories. No one wants to rock the boat, to be controversial. Why write about the Blyth staithes if we're going to carry a Coal Board denial? Why write about the outrageous nature of Israel's killing of stone-throwing children if we're going to get outraged letters to the editor?

Much better to stick to clichés. Arab "terrorists" threaten Israel. Israeli "security chiefs" warn Arafat. Can Arafat "control" his own people, we asked when the Israelis asked the same question. Yet when a Jewish settlers' group killed two Palestinian civilian men and a baby, we did not ask if Sharon could "control" his own people. Since the Palestinians had not asked that question, we did not ask it. We were silent that time round. Over five days in the North-east and on the long drive back to London, I listened to the radio news. Two Israelis had been killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber at Binyamina. The Israelis "struck back" at the Palestinians, killing four guerrillas in a "targeted" killing. "Targeted" was Israel's word. In other words, death squads. But that wasn't what the BBC said. When the Israeli settlers murdered the three Palestinians – including the baby – the Israeli police were reported as "narrowing their search" for the killers.

Never the why. Only the what.

We reported the closure of Blyth's mines. But we rarely asked why the mines had to die. We watched Blyth decay. We reported its death. In my cub reporter days, we watched its last moments as a coal-and-ship city. But we didn't scratch the black, caked soot off the walls of Newcastle and ask why Britain's prime ministers allowed the centre of the Industrial Revolution to go to the grave. Harland agreed that there was a culture of "accepting" authority. We didn't challenge the police or the council – or the social services. They may not have been our friends. But we needed them. We respected them, in an odd sort of way. They were the "chiefs," the "bosses."

And now we rarely challenge friendly governments. We can (and should) attack Arafat's corrupt dictatorship in Palestine. But Israeli wrong-doing has to be "balanced" with quotations from Israel's "security chiefs." The off-the-record briefing from the council clerk or the police chief has become the off-the-record briefing from the Foreign Office. Look how we responded to Nato's wartime Kosovo briefings. How we accepted. How we parroted the words.

I'm glad the *Chron* exists. It was good to me. So was Big Jim Harland. He made me understand the need for accuracy. "Say what you like later," he once told me. "But for Christ's sake, get it right." But our conversation this month left me with much to think about.

What was it he said to me before lunch? "If we'd said what we thought, well, we'd have called that bias." And no doubt one day, we'll find those reporters who so blithely accepted Nato's briefings and Israel's line on the Palestinians "revealing" the truth.

Like the rotten borough and the crooked cop and the sinister abuse of children in Blyth, they'll all one day be ready to tell us what they really knew. Only it will be a bit late to make any difference. ●

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HELEN FLOOK

BLAME THE PRINTER!

What happens to a print client when the book varnish won't dry or pages are reversed? Most pick themselves up, dust themselves off and find a new printer. **Tony Sutton** *doesn't; he bites back*

My career in publishing began in the hot metal hellhole of a weekly newspaper production department in an English country market town, so I can attest to the bitter taste of injustice – and near pathological desire for bloody revenge – that occurs after being blamed for mistakes that some 'Suit' earning twice my salary should have spotted before ink got anywhere near paper.

I understood the stupidity of those thoughts moments after tossing aside my paste-up knife and transferring my services across the room to the editorial department. The moment of epiphany came when Journalism Rule No. 1 was stamped indelibly onto my forehead: When things go wrong, duck for cover and blame someone else, preferably The Printer.

What a wonderful idea.

I was an avid convert despite any reservations I might harbour about the unfairness to my former production colleagues. Many years later, all of those lingering doubts have long disappeared. When things go wrong, it usually is the printer's fault – the result of, perhaps, too many long hours with nothing better to pass the time than sniffing half-empty barrels of ink while watching presses revolve.

Want examples? Let's start with the day the managing director and sales manager of a very large print company visited my office after my then partner and I complained that the first edition of a newsletter we'd produced for a major international corporation had been printed with murky grey images that should have been deep black. We asked them to print the newsletters again.

They looked at the job and stared at the film for a few moments and cried, in stereo, "You'll have to pay for the reprint; it was your fault – the film was wrong."

We grabbed the allegedly flawed film, took it to the tiny instant print shop round the corner and had a few pages reprinted. An hour later, the pages returned, with blacks as dark as a coal cellar on a cloudless night. Examining the evidence, the duo sniffed and blustered, "But it's not right, the ink's still wet, it's too black – the printer used *jobbing* ink." Then they left the office, film under their arms and bootprints embedded in the seats of their pants. This time the job was reprinted perfectly. They paid. Their company later went bankrupt.

My company once published the first edition of a book. This time the film was fine and the presswork immaculate. However, the delivery deadline just happened to fall one day before a long weekend. All that stood between the bindery foreman and his summer cottage was the cover varnish that refused to dry.

The good news: 1,000 books were delivered on time. The bad news: all 1,000 covers had to be prised from each other when the boxes were opened. The sales manager at the print shop apportioned blame. "It's your fault. What do you expect when you rush us on a holiday weekend?"

The 1,000 large-format paperbacks were returned to the printer only to be transformed into hard cover books. He said it was cheaper than reprinting the job.

The unfortunate book went to a second edition a year later, this time with an independent sales consultant and a new printer (the original bunch went belly up). I discovered that having an extra person between me and the printer wasn't a good idea when the books were printed on glossy paper, instead of matte.

The consultant had ordered the wrong stock. Faced with a big print bill, he begged for mercy.

"Take 'em, your customers won't notice and I'll give you 30 per cent discount."

No dice. I axed the consultant and figured that would be the end of my troubles. Two weeks later, I unpacked the newly reprinted books. This time, the paper was fine and the cover looked great. But the spines fell off.

I made another call to the printer. Curses. Apologies. He checked with the bindery. "Sorry, we used the wrong glue. Throw 'em away; we'll reprint the lot."

Third time lucky. The final batch was fine. Unfortunately it arrived six weeks after the deadline.

I spent several years as editor of a large gravure-printed national magazine in South Africa. Each month I'd travel to the printer to check the final page assembly and watch the magazine sections come off the giant web presses. And each month, the print foreman and I would go through the same charade.

Me: *"Looks good, now can you get the colour on the editorial spreads to print in register?"*

Him: *"Yes, but then the ads on the other side of the sheet will be out of whack. My instructions are to get the ads right. Must be a problem with the editorial film. Now sod off."*

I never did get an answer to my plea to get both sides in register.

I also edited a woman's magazine in South Africa. After taking the helm, my first editorial decision, after looking at the messy halftones of previous issues, was to subcontract the film to a flashy new production company. Their proofs were crisp and clear, but the press check was a nightmare. Every face (and there were dozens of them) in all the photographs had filled in. A sea of eyes and teeth shone through the murk. After a post mortem the production house admitted, "Whoops, the screen was too fine; we thought you were running the job on glossy paper. I survived that disaster. They didn't.

Editors, of course, are not immune from print madness. As part of a deal with one of my newspaper clients, I had 1,000 copies of my company journal printed on its presses. The publications were delivered to my office by my pal the editor. The next morning, after opening the parcel and discovering that the title of the publication had shifted two inches down the page, I rang him and asked what had gone wrong. "Oh," he replied, "I thought that was what you wanted. It looked original and arty … we'll put it back on the press next week."

But printers are not all bad.

One of my fondest memories of my days in South Africa revolves around a pre-Christmas lunch with Roger D, print company sales manager par excellence, with whom I enjoyed a celebration of a wonderful year of business which ended 12 hours later after a blurry escapade involving large quantities of alcohol, an alien abduction, an incident involving my son's tie, and a police cell. But that's another story …

It was all Roger's fault, of course.

Tony Sutton is editor and publisher of Nine On Ten. The president of News Design Associates, he may be contacted at tonysutton@newsdesign.net

South African editor, author and TV personality **Denis Beckett** *has a famous forebear. He's never been quite sure, exactly, what to call old Sam and can't make sense or sausages out of the old boy's plays, but one episode in Paris made him see how a brush with fame can turn the most sophisticated members of our supposedly-civilised society into star-struck groupies*

FAMOUS COUSIN BLUES

TONY JENKINS

Sons of famous fathers are used to being weighed up and found wanting. They are introduced not as "Joe is a panel-beater" or "Joe climbed Kilimanjaro with me" or "Joe collects bottle-tops" but as "… son of Jack". Follow your father's career, and you can't win. If you get to the top it's "He made it because of his father," and if you stop at a normal level part-way up it's "despite his father, he flopped." Take up a different field, as your contemporaries do without thinking twice, and the pop psychologists go orgasmic: "Look! running away from his father!"

"Samuel Beckett was a dimmish name in my childhood. He wrote these plays and things that nobody understood, nobody in my world, anyway"

Even if you can laugh off the volunteer analysts you spend much time with paid analysts, working out why you fit under a stone after family lunches. Then your father dies and thereafter you fit under a stone all the time, his spirit hovering judgmentally over you forever. You get to wish he'd been a personnel manager.

This information comes to you courtesy of two guys I know, screwed-up sons of famous fathers. My own personnel-manager father loved me regardless. He even took it so easy that I was an also-ran on the sportsfield, where he'd been captain of everything, that I didn't know this was supposed to be a classic paternal problem until I learned it from a movie at the age of 38.

However, I have suffered lesser strains of the same genus. Long before mid-life crisis, and nearly as long before penis-compensation was heard of, I had famous cars, great magnificent impractical Jaguar XKs and E-types which had rear visibility like a blindfold, left oil-puddles on your friends' driveways and burst their water-pipes on dates. I loved them. But I saw the syndrome.

Friends didn't say, "Hullo, Denis, how are you". They said, "Hullo, Denis, how're your cars." You'd get to feel like an adjunct, not a living breathing person but an incidental accessory to an inanimate object. When after a modest history in the love-life trials I walked the aisle with a beauty they said, "It must be the cars". (Ha. It took 10 years to wean her from Cortinas on to the heady delights of a Toyota station wagon.)

Then there was the other matter, Famous Second Cousin.

Or maybe it's Famous Uncle-Once-Removed. All these years and I still need help. If a person is your father's cousin, what is he to you? Technically I think it's second cousin, but that doesn't feel right. You wouldn't have a first cousin 40y years older. Uncle seems better, but officially that's a parent's brother. And officially, as far as I know, once-removed means an affinity relative as opposed to a consanguine relative, i.e. marriage rather than so-called blood.

Anyway, that's what Sam was. Samuel Beckett was a dimmish name in my childhood. He wrote these plays and things that nobody understood, nobody in my world, anyway. But somewhere else, London and places like that, where they read books without pictures on the cover, minds doubtless greater than our own developed the idea that these plays and especially one of them, *Waiting for Godot*, unsealed the human predicament.

As Sam's name grew, so did reflected glory and/or mystery. At first only an occasional English Hons type asked if I was related, and then plumbed me for insights as if the genius was transmitted through a network of genetic cyberspace. They didn't tend to ask twice, having concluded that I was either the family retard or was selfishly guarding the priesthood's key. But the first-go question session came up increasingly and in late high-school I armed myself. I read *Godot*. It was Greek but, begorrah, impressive Greek. Was I proud of my … er, relative.

At boarding school, whither my dad was despatched at the age of six, Sam, eight years older, was for a brief while a big feature in a small boy's life. He was father-figure (my dad's dad died young), elder brother (no incumbent) and ersatz mother (the official title-holder was truant.) I don't believe they ever saw each other after schooldays. But, the one having settled in France, because the Irish were too gregarious, and the other in South Africa, which had given him a wife, they corresponded.

They didn't correspond out of nostalgia, let alone literary mind-meeting. They corresponded about money. In their boyhoods a lady named Toshie had, unaided by ties whether consanguine or affinite, provided mother-substitution services to both. Sub-

"... Another pfft. Sam was sick of Godot, and everything he'd written. He was only interested in what he was still to write. And in cricket ..."

sequently her cupboard had bared a bit, and Sam and my dad rallied round.

Later an aged uncle struck a cash-flow crisis, and then an aunt, and Sam and my dad were getting into quite a habit, along with other cousins. Which was incidentally a strange and lovely thing. The family had once been rich and riven, and now here scarcity had wrought unity. It was also a surprising thing. The family were (mainly) Protestant, supposedly the more anally-retentive brand of Irish who kept the spare tyre pumped and the coal-pile stocked, but the bloodline evidently balked at premiums and prudence.

At about 18, in around 1965, I asked my dad for Sam's address. Boulevard St Jacques, Paris 14. I wrote, "Dear Uncle Samuel…", after consuming half a pad on Second-Cousin, Mr Beckett, Sir, and clever-clever alternatives which I am too embarrassed to publicly remember. Sam replied in tiny black ink on very white, very stiff paper the size of a cigarette packet, 30s. He said Uncle Samuel sounded like a folk tale. He corrected my recap of the lineage. He ignored my earnest freshman references to his books (several wasted pads). He said to come and visit some time.

Some time, I did – memorably, but not necessarily for the right reasons. I was 24, and as fit as the next man. Sam was 64. We walked. Did we walk! We walked everywhere, and Sam walked way better than I walked. I puffed forward with blisters on my feet and mind while Sam strode like a Derby winner. The times my burning blisters or aching muscles forced a softening of his pace, I heard distant chimes of that Famous Father tune – hey boy, match up.

It was worse when we talked.

By now I, in the fashion of conscience-stricken English-speaking humanities graduates in South Africa, was sure that apartheid, our political system, was the sorest blot on the face of the planet. Our lives were built on opposing it, and I devised a plot, a secret weapon. Sam would write a play on apartheid.

Plays on apartheid weren't new. South Africans wrote them all the time. People like me barely knew there were plays on anything else. But they hadn't so far galvanised the world. That needed Sam's heft. I'd give Sam the lowdown, how the pale lot made all the rules and the other guys were cut out, even from catching our buses. He'd be aghast, having previously heard the enormities only through media filters. He'd write his play, which I wouldn't understand but it would set the Great Minds alight. Galvanisation ahoy.

Heh. Sam's interest in Africa and all its works was nought. That he wasn't a man for politics and parties, I had divined. But our issue was supposed to be above that, on a higher plane, a test case for humanity. He didn't seem to grasp that we were the epicentre of mankind's struggle and that civilised people from pole to pole ought to agonise daily over how to help the forces of light resolve South Africa's injustices. He said in effect: pfft. From such a prince of intellect this was shattering, unbelievable. And a consanguine at that!

I had also swotted my *Godot*, plus *Malone Dies* and more, assuming that in time off from plotting the plot I'd receive the ultimate insider's insight. Another pfft. Sam was sick of *Godot*, and everything he'd written. He was only interested in what he was still to write, and in cricket. South Africans were reputedly cricket-mad, in the corner left over from rugby-madness. But my cranium was too stuffed with the Cause to leave any corner for either. Sam would ask if so-and-so was on form. I'd say, "Um, does he bat or bowl?" and shrink a little.

One place we walked was to Sam's restaurant in Montmartre, which was about equidistant with Moscow, as far as I could make out through my blisters. He had a permanent table, with vast red vinyl seats.

On the way we passed a grand mansion. Sam said, "This is the Men of Lesser Society."

I thought, that's a strangely coy way of putting it. I said, "I see, like an asylum."

Sam gave me a sharp glance. "I said, this is the Men of Letters Society."

My mind's eye saw him wondering what had gone awry with the genetic strain. Or whether they bred 'em thick in Africa.

Still, I slept on a couch in his small poky apartment ("Boulevard St Jacques" had given the impression of a gorgeous French 'otel) and while the Jameson's sank we did establish a commonality. He wrote later, with "appreciation of your dogged dedication, even if I cannot share it", and to invite me to come again.

By 1989, Sam was to France what Princess Di was to Britain, except for legs, and I was still on the same old mission. By now my dogged dedication was given over to a theory, on which I had written two books and enough articles to wreck my magazine, *Frontline*.

Frontline, of which I was owner and editor, and frequently sales-rep and bottle-washer, was reasonably light in the Righteousness Dept, at least by the norms of the anti-apartheid industry, and an allegedly lively journal until the theory sabotaged it. But the theory was my way of getting past apartheid, as opposed to shrieking at the ruling Afrikaners as per chorus. Having found the theory I had to go at it, like Don Quixote and windmills.

Lest Tony Sutton* come at me with weaponry*, I shall not belabour you with the theory, much. Just to say that

Sam Beckett on Boulevard St Jacques in Paris. **Photograph: John Minihan**

no country with deep majority/minority splits is an A+ success. The more minority rights you provide the more you short-change majority rule. Both lots gripe, heads are broken, and paper constitutions frazzle trying to squelch natural pressures from both sides. You need something better, viz a structure which does not purport to dictate the fields of battle but firmly locks the methods of battle to a web of interacting power-sites.

Alright, (relax, Tony) it may not ring bells in a paragraph, but note this: One day, when Earth's Democracy Version 1 has graduated to about 4.0, vexed societies will routinely tie the wildmen to the anchor of ordinary people's votes. Everyone will be in a majority in some foci of power and a minority in others, and much age-old shit will dry up.

In '89 my life-calling was to get a Version 4 prototype on the map. My own government had wax in its ears but on the diplomatic circuit there were flickers. On the day of Tiananmen Square I was in a classy Paris restaurant with France's Under-Secretary for Africa and three of his henchmen, urging France to pressurise the apartheid regime into supercharging a richer democracy than had been heard of here in the hub of the universe.

The Under-Sec listened approximately politely until the third refill. Then he waxed lyrical (and admittedly amusing) about utopia and dreams, and we regressed to standard politics like whether X's alliance with Y was intact and did Z have a bottle problem.

In the course of goodbyes the Under-Sec asked jokingly if I was related to Sam. I said I was forthwith proceeding to the Metro to call on him.

I ceased to be a nutcase from nowhere and became Royalty. Metro!? No way. Foreign Affairs had cars, special luxury cars for VIPs like me. A special luxury car was summoned. It took a while coming, during which I (a) learned that my theory was the greatest discovery since E=mc?, and (b) checked my watch. Sam expected me at 5. It was after 4. I'd rather be on the Metro. But I was a prisoner of vicarious fame, and delighted by my hosts' delayed dawning, and quite willing to be driven through Paris in a special luxury car with flags flying. Would they have outriders?

We waited on the pavement as we talked. I scoured for a long sleek car with an immaculate driver. I was re-explaining why, no, enriched democracy does not mean neighbouring villages legislating to drive on different sides of the road, when there was a noisy shouting from a hot cross T-shirted person leaning from a scruffy 10-year-old Renault.

It turned out I had to be escorted as well as chauffeured. The two smaller henchmen squashed impossibly in the front passenger seat. The Under-Sec and I shared special luxury at the back with henchman three, whose stomach flopped on my lap. Sweat occurred. So did rush-hour.

Denfert-Rochereau is in deep southern Paris, a.k.a. slightly north of Orleans. By 8-ish, when we pulled up at an old-age home, I was sick of being heavyweight by proxy, dismissed for what you are and respected for what somebody else is. I was sick of the car, sick of the flopping stomach, sick of the Gauloise air.

My escorts wanted to escort me right into Sam's room. I drew the line. I said I'd check with him; bloody liar.

Sam's legs locomoted but you could have stood a bottle on his back, if the weight didn't crumple him. He looked like one of his own characters. He was nowhere near the world of Under-Secretaries, theories, or the magical effect of his name. He poured whisky and he toasted bread. We ate it dry. He asked after my father ("fine, thanks") and my trip ("fine, thanks") and told me he would be dead before the year was out. I blurted the obligatory guff – years to go, medical science… He cut me off with "bullshit." We sat in silence but for toast crunching. Then he said, "thank you for having visited me."

The trip back took half an hour on the Metro. Sam died on December 28.

Each year has more press about Sam as genius and giant, each year more audible wonderment: "Your uncle wrote, and won the Nobel. You write, and who are you?"

Does it scar my psyche? Not a damn. Why then tell it? Chiefly because Tony Sutton nagged and grouched and I owe him one. But maybe there is another reason, which is a once-and-for-all answer to FAQ Number 1. From now on I can just hand out copies.

The question is: Did he mean it or was he having us on, especially with some of the later stuff like the one where you pay good legal tender to watch the stage lighting change?

The answer is: Don't ask me. I had one comprehensible conversation with the guy, with double-tots on the way. When I crashed on his couch that night in '71 I understood the universe, but in the morning it had sneaked off. I believe an urgent message on the meaning of life is in there somewhere, but where, when and whether it might be supplemented by a secret guffaw at the gullibility of the believers, I have less idea than any of millions of Lit III students around the world.

What I know is, he did it his way. That's a good enough model for a second cousin. Or sort-of nephew.

•Why, you may be wondering, would I do that? Because I spent 10 years as the long-suffering design man on Frontline. And there's only so much of Democracy Vers. 4.0 a guy can take before resorting to violence. Especially on deadline. – Tony Sutton

Denis Beckett's new book, Jetlag, SA Airways in the Andrews Era, is published by Viking, a division of Penguin Books.

SAY, HAS ANYONE SEEN MY EDITOR?

Modern technology means having a production centre 3,000 miles away should be simple, says **Tony Sutton**. *Until the Internet connection fails …*

It's 9.30 on a Saturday evening in early November. I should be enjoying dinner with my wife; but, instead, I'm in my studio feeling slightly nervous. I'm on deadline, designing a tabloid for a pal, Lesley Riddoch, who's 3,000 miles from Toronto on a remote island off the Scottish coast.

But a huge batch of copy and photographs haven't arrived over the Internet, I lost contact with Les two days ago, and I'm increasingly convinced that the missing stuff's never going to arrive …

Welcome to the wonderful world of *Worldwoman,* a "virtual" newspaper written by women, for women around the world. The pages of *Worldwoman* never see a printing press but are published in pdf format so that anyone with access to electricity and a computer, can download the pages, read them and – if they wish – print and circulate them.

But only if I can get these 12 damn tabloid pages produced by Sunday evening …

The Worldwoman adventure began almost three years ago while I was developing prototypes for the launch of Scotland's broadsheet Sunday Herald in a converted bus garage in Glasgow. Lesley Riddoch, along with editor Andrew Jaspan and consultant Charles McGhee, constituted the "staff" of the paper.

Over dinner one evening, Les told me she was getting funding for a new international paper that she hoped to launch in a few months. Would I design it for her? For nothing? Sure, that's what pals are for …

Back home in Canada, it only took a few beers for me to persuade another pal, Toronto type designer Nick Shinn, that Worldwoman needed its own font. He contributed a new font – Worldwide – in a single weight. Assembled for May Day 1999, the first edition appeared on the organization's website for readers to download.

Now, two years later, Les had wondered if I'd like to help her produce another issue to help generate cash for a training program she had set up for female journalists in Africa and the Middle East.

That's why I'm here, sweating. And cursing …

Early the next morning, after leaving ever more desperate e-mails for an unresponsive editor, I decided that if the paper was to hit the deadline that evening, I'd better abandon the page plan, forget the missing copy and pictures and start creating.

The first decisions were easy: the paper was being dropped onto the website in single pages, so page jumps made even less sense than usual. And Lesley had told me earlier that I should highlight as many different countries on the front page as possible, while leading with the Afghanistan story. So the cover became an index – anchored by the only decent picture I received (thanks to *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh). The flow of pages was also an easy decision: news at the front separated from features by a page of opinion, upon which I had left space for an editorial column, although I had no way of contacting the editor to ask her to write it.

And typography was a dream compared to the first issue: Nick Shinn had expanded the single weight of Worldwide into a full range, so I chose the bolder weights for news heads using a light version for features. Contrasting sans faces came from his Brown family.

Main problem, apart from the missing stories, was that only two photographs had arrived over the Internet. Rummaging through a box of abandoned CDs helped resolve my dilemma. Amazingly, I found a photograph of a Malaysian woman and child for a story about midwives, while a wonderful low-res image of the twin towers of the World Trade Center provided the perfect photograph for a page of letters on the September 11 tragedy. And a feature detailing why Icelandic women don't take their husbands' names was admirably illustrated by art from another previously abandoned CD.

Other news pages were handled by ignoring art altogether – adapting "found" art soon becomes gratuitous – using white space, headlines, introductions and pullquotes to counteract the grayness of the text.

Feature pages were a different problem. Most of the stories already had to be trimmed to fit the pages, so art would need to be small and understated – except for the last page with its story about female circumcision in Uganda. By the time I got to this page, it was late on Sunday evening, there was only this and one other story, which was 1,500 words too long, left. Which to use? Easy decision … I spent a few minutes searching for an image of young African women, manipulated it in Photoshop, wrote the headline, found a strong pullquote and quickly built the page around it.

After that it was plain sailing – make sure the page numbers on the front page matched the stories inside, then a final spellcheck, after which I converted the Quark files into pdfs and zipped them to Jim Byrne, who runs *Worldwoman's* website in Glasgow.

Just one last detail remained to be cleared up on Monday morning before I flew off to meet a paying client: there was still a big hole on Page 7 awaiting an editorial and I had no idea where Lesley was. I switched on computer to find this message: "Ended up on Skye for weekend. No plane off till this morning and BBC remote access system collapsed, so no laptop. Any big PROBS?"

An hour later, the editorial was in place, the final page was shipped and I was halfway to the airport.

This year, Lesley Riddoch is planning more issues of *Worldwoman*, but she's promised to stay well away from small islands on deadline days.

I hope.

Worldwoman may be downloaded in pdf format at www.worldwoman.net
Africawoman may be downloaded at www.africawoman.net

AND THEN THERE WAS AFRICAWOMAN

It's a Friday evening in early February. I should be watching TV but I'm checking the e-mail. A message arrives from Nairobi, via Glasgow. It's Les: Do I have time to produce the first issue of Africawoman, written by a bunch of women from East and West Africa? Lunchtime on Saturday it's done, with a bit of help with photographs from a client in South Africa. Read it at www.africawoman.net. – TS