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Obit writers find that death becomes us

Jul. 10, 2006. 01:47 PM

CATHY DUNPHY
LAS VEGAS, N.M.

Jim Sheeler is a slight, unassuming young man in pressed blue jeans who looks 23, which is 15 years younger than he really is. He is at the front of the cramped conference room because he is our star, a winner this year of a Pulitzer Prize.



R. THOMAS BERNER PHOTO

Telegraph obits editor Andrew McKie: "paying attention to the dead is a vital part of our lives."

It is for "The Final Salute," his story in the *Rocky Mountain News* about what happens after "the knock at the door" — when the square-jawed, clear-eyed Marine, straight of back and splendid in full military regalia, tells the trembling, dark-haired woman now slumped against it, one hand over her stomach to protect her unborn child, that her man is not coming home from Iraq. At least not upright.

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"I'm looking for scenes of life," Sheeler tells us, eyes earnest behind his glasses. "Tidbits of lives. The dog-eared pages in a book."

So after a time, that woman — Katherine — let Sheeler hold the baby blanket she had knit, soft and green, the one her husband Jim had slept in his last night at home because he wanted his baby to know how he smelled. And that's what Sheeler wrote about.

Some of us are crying because his prose is so damn good, because Sheeler himself is so damn good — and sensitive and decent — and because he is one of us, an obit writer, who made good.

This is the Eighth Great Obituary Writers' Conference, and this is also Las Vegas, New Mexico, not Nevada, on a recent hot Saturday afternoon. We — the death writers and this baking, shrivelled, silent town — seem made for one another. Other writers have noted this, reported it, dipped it in irony, sprinkled it with a little scorn, and maybe the scribe from *USA Today* or one of the two film crews currently covering us, crowding us, might make something of it as well.

If they do, they're not getting it. Or us.

The slouching, skinny Scot with the shiny complexion in the huge, black cowboy hat is obit editor of *The Daily Telegraph* of London, the acknowledged world leader in the genre. He loves telling about the time his paper inadvertently and prematurely killed off Mrs. Tex Ritter. The paper was told by the nursing home that she had moved on, and she had — to another floor.

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And there are obit fans here: Alexis Chubrich is young and hip and hyperventilating.

"I have found what I want to do," she says. "I love this. I want to get home to Tempe (Arizona) right now and get on to the computer."

The tall, blond Brit who sounds just a little bit like Bertie Wooster is a Mensa member and respected stringer for *The Times* of London, a talented writer who penned obits for all the victims of last summer's London bus bombings.

Tim Bullamore is also about to sign on for a program leading to a PhD degree to do with obituaries at the university in Bath.

Conference regular Alana Baranick of *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio, won a special citation from the American Society of Newspaper Editors last year for "A Life Story," her obituaries on so-called ordinary people or, as she put it, "people I wish I had known."

And conference first-timer Betty Abah is a Nigerian journalist who wants to use obituaries "as a tool for accountability" in her country. When she says this, there is an intake of breath.

We are accustomed to our own world of obituaries, the ones heralding those with a zest for life, who put up a brave fight against a disease, lived for their families, never met a stranger, left the world a better place, and we are even getting used to the obit-writing blogs and website pages such as [stiffs.com](#), the [Blog of Death](#), [Find a Grave](#), [Last Writes](#).

We know, too, that readers love our obituaries. They phone us; they write us; they tell us they buy the paper because of us.

The first anthology of obituaries published by *The Daily Telegraph* several years ago shot to the top of the bestseller list. Its latest (and 17th) is *Chin Up Girls!*, a collection of women's obituaries.

Hoping to capitalize on all this is a slick magazine called *Obit*, coming next year. Editor Krishna Andavolu is under 30, enthusiastic and nonplussed when Joan Harvey from *The Oregonian* circulates a list of actual quotes from obits submitted by family and funeral homes: "Cause of death: retired to Rockway"; "He was an adamant fisherman"; "Hobbies: Music, Collecting hate, Football."

Then there's Steve Miller, the obit writer from *The New York Sun*, who escaped from his office at the World Trade Center on 9/11 and decided to quit his job working in IT for a Japanese bank to do what he has always wanted: this.

Two years ago, he and Amelia Rosner, a New York ad copywriter who runs an online list called [alt.obits](#) and keeps tabs on its dead pool, came tearing into the conference during its last session hollering, "Stop the presses." ("I had always wanted to say that," Miller later fessed up.)

Ronald Reagan had just died, and the conference room emptied in a shot as, journalistic pulses racing, everyone tried to phone the office. Later, several of them wrote about being at an obit writers' conference when news came of the dead ex-president. Even later, Adam Bernstein of *The Washington Post* was spotted strolling back from the town drugstore, dipping into a commemorative bag of jellybeans he'd just bought in Reagan's memory.

This year, there were no dead presidents, but something else was happen-

(<http://www.obitpage.com>) followed a couple of years later when she began collecting membership fees.

She tells the story in her long Texan drawl at the beginning of every conference, how she was having drinks and talking about obits with some friends back in '98 in a North Dallas bar, how "the idea was hatched in a cool, dark place."

Betcha can't organize a conference for that, one friend taunted. Betcha I cay-an, she countered.

Gilbert is a former teacher, policy adviser, workshop leader and trainer who reads the obit sections in seven daily newspapers and believes they are the highest form of newspaper writing, requiring a newspaper's top talent. She is very popular here.

**'When I ask people how they are, people
think the question is suspect'**

Bob Chaundy
BBC obit writer

The first conference was held in Archer City, Tex., home of author Larry McMurtry and featured in *The Last Picture Show*. After a couple of years, it moved to Las Vegas, where friends of Gilbert's owned a historic hotel. Last year, it crossed over to Bath, England, and drew academics from Spain and Australia, and an obit writer from Jerusalem, who this year all sent their regrets and best wishes.

"We are all family," Gilbert beams, arms folded across ample, glittering bosom, ignoring the elephant in the room.

If this is a family, it might well be a dysfunctional one. Death, after all, is rarely a subject for the dinner table.

Still, obit writing is enjoying something of a renaissance these days. Although a history of obits has yet to be written, it is believed the first English one appeared in *The Newes in 1663* and that the form flourished for several decades after 1790 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

Victorian obits were ornate and flowery. They were replaced in the last part of the 19th century by detailed, graphic reporting on the cause of death, or even the death itself.

In 1870, *The Times* wrote of Charles Dickens' demise: "The pupil of the right eye was much dilated, that of the left contracted, the breathing stertorous, the limbs flaccid until half an hour before death, when some convulsion occurred."

By the end of World War I, the theory goes, people were fed up with reading about death. *The Times* didn't even have a separate obituaries editor until 1920, and it was 30 years after that before it began to augment its fabled store of advance-written obituaries to its current level of 5,000.

In 1987, after the upstart newspaper *The Independent* began offering readers anecdote-filled stories that included the appraisal of character, context and craft found in a good feature, *The Daily Telegraph* also upgraded its obituary coverage.

This was the era of Hugh Massingberd, putatively the newspaper world's most famous obit editor and writer (and the special guest at Gilbert's Bath conference last year). When he took over the obit pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, he made the genre, well, fun. Sly fun.

Readers were quick to pick up the Massingberd code: A man or woman known for "colourful accounts of his exploits" was a liar, the "tireless raconteur" a crashing bore, the "convivial companion" a drunk.

They were also introduced to wonderful characters, such as the 3rd Lord Moynihan, whose career included stints as "bongo-drummer, brothel-keeper, drug-smuggler and police informer, but "Tony" Moynihan also claimed other areas of expertise — as "professional courier," "currency

manipulator" and "authority on rock and roll."

They read about the first chaplain of a striptease club and the judge who once said: "A lot of my colleagues are just constipated Methodists."

Not to be outdone, *The Times* published an obit in 2001 on Rosemary Brown, whom they described as a "musical medium who had Debussy in her drawing room and went shopping with Liszt."

"The phenomenon began in 1964 when Brown, a middle-aged widow with two young children and only a rudimentary musical education, was nursing broken ribs after an accident in the school kitchen where she worked," the obit explained. "One day, while playing the piano at home in Balham, she suddenly lost control of her hands. Looking up, she saw Liszt with his hawk nose, white hair and black gown guiding her fingers over the keys. Helpfully, he spoke English."

Though Australian academic and journalist Nigel Starck has hailed obituaries as "the finest form of journalism" and "true social histories," it was only in May 1994 that *The Melbourne Age* became the first Australian newspaper to dedicate a full page to them daily.

In North America, obituaries were the sole purview of the prominent. Until the Industrial Revolution, their obits heralded their invariable sterling character; afterwards, the obits highlighted the person's work and wealth.

Recently, another type of obit has been gaining popularity. Most probably as a result of the "Portraits of Grief," *The New York Times'* Pulitzer Prize-winning series of thumbnail obituaries of every victim of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, newspapers have begun featuring profiles and stories of so-called ordinary citizens.

"Why would people want to read obits, especially about real people?" asks Alana Baranick, author of *Life on the Death Beat: A Handbook for Obituary Writers*. "Of course you have folks who want to know when a member of their community dies. But you could announce the death in a sentence or even less. In two sentences, you could add the funeral arrangements. It takes an obituary to tell the story of the dearly departed's life."

And these lives are often, in the words of Texas freelance writer Spencer Michlin, "juicy lives."

The key word is *life*. Obituaries are life stories; it's the stories on the front pages — the news pages — that are all about death.

Obits are biographies, and a respite from the war, famine, gun fatalities and the rest of the gruesome news people take in daily via media. Kay Powell, obit editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, believes local obituaries — about the butcher in the corner grocery store, for instance — give readers a sense of being connected to a place.

In Canada, *The Globe and Mail* led the way with "Lives Lived," an obituary usually written by friends or family that occupies choice real estate on the back page of its front section. It is generally considered the newspaper's most popular feature.

For the last three years here at the *Star*, I have been writing "Lifelines," weekly profiles of people no one has ever heard of. I think they should have. These lives are filled with purpose, passion and power, as well as pain, loss, squandered chances and strange coincidences. What I love is telling their stories; what I don't love is telling people what I do.

Only here can I talk shop and lean forward in my chair to drink in Bullamore's scholarly and thoughtful session about the obituaries of a terrorist, or Kay Powell's rousing call to include more women as obit subjects.

Among her examples: Carole Connely, 63, artist and prankster. "If her husband dozed off early, she handed out washable markers to her children to decorate him with while he slept. 'Carole was a mystery to me,' said her husband, who married her three months after their first date;" miniature-dachshund breeder Rosemary Nettleman, 89, who rarely found anyone she deemed "dogworthy" enough to adopt for one of her puppies; and Mary Hughie, 89, who successfully sued the state of Georgia over its ban on

married women teachers.

But as Bob Chaundy from the BBC said: "When I ask people how they are, people think the question is suspect." And in the real world, the one outside this accommodating New Mexican town, most people take an involuntary step back when I tell them what I write.

The man from Alabama has been eavesdropping on our conversation. There are only two tables of customers at this Santa Fe restaurant, and they are next to each another. "You sound like you have been at a conference," he says to Kay Powell and me. "What do you do?"

Jim Sheeler has just told us about the young widow saying that sometimes when she is missing her husband, she takes out his story, re-reads it and feels better. He spoke about noticing the torn fingers of the white glove worn by the young guardsman firing the obligatory salute to his dead comrade. Then, he had held up that very glove.

One night earlier, over tapas, Bryan Marquard of the *Boston Globe* told me how an obit of his had righted a decades-old wrong when he started it with the words: "John Doe was not a moron." The man had been mistakenly diagnosed by the state as a child. He had received an official apology two days before he died.

And in the final conference address, the brilliant Andrew McKie said that we "lay down a mark to say that people who have died were a part of what we are. The simple part of paying attention to the dead is a vital part of our lives."

I still don't want to tell the man what I do.

But Powell doesn't hesitate. "We're obit writers," she says.

"Oh," he says, and smiles. "You're poets."

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