

# Reporting Back

## NOTES ON JOURNALISM



# Lillian Ross

"You can no more resist plunging from one of her finely chiseled sentences to the next any more than you can keep your eyes from following the camera as you from frame to frame."

—LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

# REPORTING BACK:

## Notes on Journalism

---

LILLIAN ROSS

COUNTERPOINT

A MEMBER OF THE PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP

NEW YORK

Portions of all the pieces reprinted in this book were originally pulished in *The New Yorker*, with the exception of "Saturday Night Lorne," which appeared in *INTERVIEW Magazine*.

Copyright © 2002 Lillian Ross

Hardback first published in 2002 by Counterpoint, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Paperback first published in 2003 by Counterpoint.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the Publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Counterpoint Books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the United States by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 11 Cambridge Center, Cambridge MA 02142, or call (617) 252-5298, (800) 255-1514 or e-mail [j.mccrary@perseus-books.com](mailto:j.mccrary@perseus-books.com).

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Ross, Lillian, 1927–

Reporting Back : notes on journalism / Lillian Ross

p. cm.

ISBN 1-58243-109-4 (hc) ISBN 1-58243-286-4 (pbk)

1. Journalism. 2. Reporters and reporting. 3. Ross, Lillian, 1927– .

I. Title.

PN4733 .R59 2002

070.4—dc21

2002003709

FIRST PRINTING

Text design by Amy Evans McClure

COUNTERPOINT

387 Park Avenue South

New York, New York 10016-8810

Counterpoint is a member of the Perseus Books Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# REPORTING BACK:

Notes on Journalism



ALSO BY LILLIAN ROSS

Picture

Portrait of Hemingway

Vertical and Horizontal

The Player (with Helen Ross)

Takes

Talk Stories

Moments with Chaplin

Adlai Stevenson

Reporting

The Fun of It (as Editor)

Here But Not Here

To *The New Yorker's* Editors—Past and Present

# CONTENTS

---

Introduction	1
Kings of Queens	13
Visitors	21
Come In, Lassie!	28
9/11, 2001	38
Adlai Stevenson	42
Presidents	52
Robert Kennedy	63
Hubert Humphrey and Ralph Bunche	71
Kids	77
Cinderellas	91
Miss Americas	104
You Dig It, Sir?	113

Benny, Yehudi, and Glenn	129
Hemingway	141
Mailer	148
John Huston	158
Chaplin	168
Lorraine Hansberry and Sidney Poitier	179
The Redgraves and Harold Pinter	188
Players	199
More Players	215
Funny Guys: The Friars and Robin Williams	229
Saturday Night Lorne	238
Truffaut and Fellini	245
Kurosawa and Coppola	259
Harvey, Jeanne, Wes, and the Diamonds	278
Chronological Order of Stories	286
Acknowledgements	291



# INTRODUCTION

---

THIS BOOK IS about the journalism that I love and work at. It is not about newspaper reporting or television anchoring or radio newscasting or Internet magazines. It is not about “*investigative* journalism,” “*confrontational* journalism,” “the *new* journalism,” or any other jargon-journalism. Journalism to me is factual writing, and the highest kind of it comes in the form of good writing, and often writing that, at its best, is witty. Every now and then, journalism has been found to be timeless; and its writers have been considered to be on a par with the best in literature. I subscribe to the classic who-what-when-where-why-and-how guidelines in my journalism, and I follow them carefully, along with some basic traditions in the service of laughter and truth. But I also enjoy the challenge of pushing traditional structures. For me, there has always been satisfaction and joy in finding or even inventing new ways of telling a story.

I don’t know whether journalistic stories contribute to any kind of social history. They might. With the terrorists’ horrifying destruction of New York’s World Trade Center and the murderous attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the initial response

of so many journalists was astonishing to see and hear. Every journalist I know relied on his expertise to meet the challenge of providing important information, understanding, consolation, and guidance to confused and heartbroken people all over the world. We know that the Second World War and the Vietnam War left us journalistic legacies of many kinds. It may take years to sort out the journalistic contributions brought forth by this still overwhelming, on-going phenomenon. The war on terrorism, in all its complicated aspects, is one I'm not equipped to write about head on. For my stories now, I've been playing it by ear. However, I do know that each one of us does whatever he or she was born to do.

In any case, it is invariably fun, and no hardship, for me to write my stories. My focus in this book is on what journalistic stories can be in themselves; where the material for them may be found; and how they may be written with clarity and humor. My purpose is to spell out some of my ideas, as they developed over fifty years, about writing these stories. To illustrate my points, I'll use excerpts from my own writing. Every good reporting writer is different from every other; every good story is different from every other. So there should be no doubt about the singularity of my point of view in doing reportorial stories in general and mine in particular.

My starting point is *The New Yorker* magazine, where I have been doing most of my reporting and writing since 1945. That is where I grew up journalistically. Initially, the freedom and support and wherewithal for doing the work came from *The New Yorker*, originally from its first and second editors, Harold Ross and William Shawn, and later on, from their successors.

My ideas for what I do in journalism were formed at the age of eight when my older sister, Helen, told me that, when she grew up, she was going to be "a travelling correspondent." She said, "I'll go all over the world, and I'll write about the way everything looks or sounds or seems to me." That was it. I absorbed her ideas, and they've never changed. I asked no questions; I merely accepted my lowly sibling role and did what Helen bade me to do and the way she bade me to do it. Wherever I've gone since, whatever I've seen or heard or felt, and however I've reported and written, I've done

it all using these borrowed sensibilities. To me, Helen was the authority on everything. She was beautiful and original and intuitive and loving and funny and smart, and she was always right. I tried to imitate her in almost every way. Helen gave me a special way of seeing and hearing that has always stayed with me. I became simultaneously detached yet empathetic. It was a generous and special working gift, and I'm forever grateful to Helen for it. When people asked me from time to time about the strongest literary influences in my work, I would give various names, including Ivan Turgenev, Laura Lee Hope, Joseph Mitchell, J. D. Salinger, and Ernest Hemingway ("The old simple words are the best," he repeatedly told me). The work of those writers indeed had a profound effect on me. The first and deepest and lasting influence to this day, however, was that of my sister Helen. She taught me to see and sense what is in people. From her, I learned what is basic to my work: my reporting is subjective in selecting facts. The clear indulgence of subjectivity in the process of selection and the objective need of factuality are absolute twin elements in my journalism. They stem from the formative powers in my own life.

I've tried to find the facts and tell the truth. Helen had a wry, sharp, original, warm, perceptive humor, about herself and everybody else she knew. Her humor echoed my father's, which was always his own. Helen also taught me irony, before I even knew the word. Among other things, our lives evolved ironically, with my continuing enjoyment of her discoveries and her premature death when she was in her forties.

The source of the other single influence on my work was William Shawn, with whom I was wholly and happily engaged in my life, personally and professionally, for almost five decades. He was the editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker* from 1952 to 1987. What he gave me before and during that stretch of time and until his death in 1992, went far beyond the editorial realm. He gave me a complete life. With Bill Shawn, daily, I developed tolerance, judgement, and taste. All of it operated in a delicate balance with our mutual appetite for discovering those most precious things—laughter and humor. William Shawn encouraged me to distill my

own sense of humor in my work. I loved making him laugh. He not only gave me the confidence to do the reporting and writing, but he also gave me a sense of life. It seems to me that every journalist needs, in addition to talent, in whatever he or she sets out to do, three clear elements: confidence, proof of being loved and needed, and a passion for life. Bill Shawn indisputably gave me all of these. A reporter who has them is completely independent and free of such needs when he or she goes out to report. That reporter asks only for his story.

In 1981, I wrote in the Introduction to my book *Reporting*, "Every reporter must work in his own way, speak with his own voice, find his individual style." There is no avoiding the fact that the very nature of a reporter, of every writer, is revealed in his writing. What you are as a human being shows up in your work. In my case, I am keenly and consciously aware of what I know are my borrowed sensibilities.

The journalists whose work I seek out and respond to are mostly at *The New Yorker*, now more than ever. In fact, I find myself reading the magazine far more today than I did in the past. I don't see what a few of my older colleagues peculiarly pine for, in what they call "the good old days" under the editorship of Harold Ross and William Shawn. These two were indeed fascinating personalities. Both were also geniuses: Ross in his inventiveness and the uniqueness of what he created; and Shawn, who fostered the emergence and continuing viability of so many diverse talents.

There is no getting away from the fact, however, that Tina Brown, who took over the job of Editor of the magazine in 1992, contributed indelibly to the continuing and growing vitality of its reporters, writers, and artists, including me. Moreover, she made many brave and ingenious personnel changes at the magazine. She found some of the best new young writers and artists and editors of our time and opened the magazine to them. She published photography for the first time. Many of my colleagues at *The New Yorker* feel as I do; we admire her and are greatly indebted to her. I worked for her very much in the same way as I had with William Shawn.

Since 1998, *The New Yorker* has had, as its editor, David Remnick, who, at forty-three, knows and understands the past mysteries of *The New Yorker* as well as the traditions. He quickly made additional changes and innovations and found interesting and exciting new writers, artists, and photographers. He has already become an original and dependable fixture. It's not easy to take over a whole institution, populated by a bunch of sensitive, self-aware egos—some of them still viable and volatile oldsters and middle-agers—and make them feel needed just as much as a bunch of wonderfully talented kids. Like Bill Shawn, he very carefully selects the editors who help him, and he fully understands and appreciates their particular brilliance and their essential modesty. There's no point in my dissembling my feelings about *The New Yorker*; it's been my journalistic home.

My kind of journalism is never created by the writer alone. There is always, for me, an editor, or a subeditor, who helps, in hundreds of ways. The credit, the acclaim, the admiration, and other rewards, without exception, always go to the writer, while the editor fades to black. A great editor—in an unsolicited parental role—leads a writer to feel he “did it all by himself.” The more insecure the writer is, the more he takes the help for granted. I prefer to have my editors stay collectively in the picture. It's more fun that way. I enjoy doing my writing for them. I do it now in practically the same way, and for the same reasons, as I did it in the very beginning.

Somewhere along the line, a critic used the phrase “fly on the wall” to describe my journalistic “technique.” Bill Shawn called it “a silly and meaningless phrase.” He said, “It's for people who don't understand that every writer is different from every other writer, the way every human being is different from every other.” Today, there are journalism teachers who actually “teach” their students to “be a fly on the wall.” Even I, to my amazement, was asked, as late as the 1990's, by a former editor at *The New Yorker* to do a certain story and, to “do it as a fly on the wall.” What craziness! A reporter doing a story can't pretend to be invisible, let alone a fly; he or she is seen and heard and responded to by the people he or she is writing about; a reporter is always chemically

involved in a story. Any editor instructing a reporter to be a fly—on or off the wall—is misguided.

Often, when I write my stories, it feels a bit like creating a short story, but it's more difficult, because I'm working with facts. I don't believe a reporter has the right to say what his subject is thinking or feeling. Furthermore, thoughts and opinions and feelings, including those of a reporter, should be demonstrated in the reporting of quotes and actions. As I write, I'm always trying to build scenes into little story-films. Whether I'm writing a short piece for *The Talk of the Town* (about a thousand words) or a long one (4,000 to 8,000 words), I always think of it visually, like a film, that tells a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In my introduction to *Reporting*, I tried to outline some of my guidelines—I called them “principles,” a word I acquired in my life with William Shawn. Today, I still try to follow these principles. I still abide by them. I've repeated some of them here; I've also amplified them.

Here are my working guidelines:

I try to write as clearly and simply and straightforwardly as possible. In poetry and fiction, there may be a place for ambiguity, but there isn't in reporting.

I choose to write only about people, situations, and events that appeal to me. Every editor I've worked with believed, as I did, that the only reason to write a story—especially a story about a person—was to shed some light on what that individual is in relation to the work he does. Fame or sensationalism alone are never appealing; in fact, they're deadening.

I don't want to write about anybody who doesn't want me to.

I don't want to write about anyone I don't like.

I trust my response to a person in the first few minutes of meeting him. The first experience—of anything, to me—is the most significant and the most memorable. It's that sense—of a person or an event or a situation—that leads me, in the act of writing, to my story. Recognition of that sense is immediate.

If another person permits me to write about him, he is opening his life to me, and I have a responsibility to him. Even if that per-

son is indiscreet about himself, or invades his own privacy, I use my own judgement in deciding what to write. Just because someone "said it" is no reason for me to use it. My obligation to people I write about doesn't end once my piece is in print. Anyone who trusts me enough to talk about himself is giving me a form of friendship. I am not doing him a "favor" in writing about him, even if he values publicity. A friend is not to be used and abandoned. A friendship established in writing about someone often continues to grow after a piece of writing is published. Although I don't want to write about people I dislike, I certainly use common sense if I write about a friend. Common sense dictates that the writer has no self-serving or self-aggrandizing motive for selecting the subject.

The old fictional portrayal of the journalist—at his desk, fedora on his head, pecking away at the typewriter, cigarette drooping from a corner of his mouth, a half-full whiskey bottle near at hand—is for the birds. Some of my former colleagues who followed that way of life found that it was damaging to their work, to their productivity, to their lives. A marvelously talented tennis player, Monica Seles, was asked recently why she goes on playing competitive tennis. She replied: "It's what I love to do, and it's given me a special and wonderful life." That's the way I feel.

I resist taking a writing assignment for financial reasons. Earning money is often mentioned as a way to "free you to do what you want to do later on." One certain way of blocking you from doing what you want to do later on is to do something else now for the money alone.

I don't use a tape recorder when I report. To me, the machine distorts the truth. It's a fast, easy, and lazy way of eliciting talk, but a conversationalist is not necessarily a writer. Tape-recorded interviews are not only misleading; they are unrealistic; they are lifeless. I don't want a machine to do my listening for me. Literal reality rarely rings true. It is not interesting. Among other things, the reporter hears too much of his own voice. Tape-recorded interviews by newspaper reporters covering straight news stories are obviously necessary. That is a different kind of journalism, the kind I don't do.

As soon as I started reporting, I started taking my notes in small, 3 x 5-inch spiral Clairefontaine notebooks. I have thousands of these notebooks filled with my scribbling. Most of the time, I use a Uni-Ball pen with a micro point; it's fast moving. I try to listen while I write, and if I can't do both simultaneously, my listening takes priority. *Listening* is the quintessential word. I make sure to write down key, identifying phrases and words that help me remember the rhythm and context of what I'm hearing. Then I'm able to reproduce long exchanges. When I'm working against an imminent deadline, I have the theme of the story in mind as I report, and I'm able to write my story from my notes. Often, I prefer to transcribe my notes as soon as possible in a way that makes it easier for me to remember exactly the way the talk, especially the dialogue, went. Invariably—and from the time I started doing this work—I found that I've had a sense of what the "story" should be right away, and, as I'd go along in writing it, there has been a certain mystical force—something outside of myself—that takes over and the story seems to write itself. Once that force takes over, it makes the work seem delightfully easy and natural and supremely enjoyable. It's sort of like having sex.

Like most of my colleagues, I do my own research, whatever the story calls for. In order to proceed quickly, I include such matters as historical facts, dates, spellings, titles, institutions, and scientific, political, economic, and social material in the course of writing a story. Before going to press, however, we at *The New Yorker* are blessed with an assemblage of fact-checkers who are the best ever. When I first came to the magazine, there were about five checkers, and they were elegant, highly cultured, esoteric, and somewhat intimidating, but kindly, middle-aged gentlemen. Their lives seemed to be devoted solely to checking. Gradually, over the years, women were admitted to the checking bastion, and they seemed to get far younger, too. These days, there is a veritable army of male and female checkers, and they are often just out of college, every one a hard-working, smart, informed potential editor or reporter. I depend on them for accuracy, and with each new story, I'm gratefully indebted to them.



What about quoting? I have to find the quotes that work for me, quotes that reveal the truth. In over fifty years of reporting, I've never had anyone I've written about question the accuracy of my quotes. One reason for my dislike of the tape recorder is that it actually interferes with one's listening to the rhythm and to the essence of what a person says and how the person says it and how the person feels and who the person is. The person is responding to the machine and not to the reporter. Furthermore, that tape-recording reporter is not being asked to be a writer. A machine is not a writer.

What I see and hear when I begin to report almost immediately leads to my finding a theme; I then know what to look for. I find the significant and revealing facts and quotes to support the theme of the story; then nothing else matters (nothing) until I've written it.

Reporters to me are writers, and the best reporters are often outstanding writers. It is with reluctance that I accept the word "journalist," even though "journalism" is supposed to be what journalists write. And the fancy word "reportage" actually gives me the creeps. The appropriate word is "reporting." The word "reportage" seems to have been taken up in the last century by people who wanted to be thought of more highly. The finest practitioners of reportorial writing are "writers."

The finest reportorial writers are truth tellers. There is a magical power in factual details. Here is an example of how factually detailed reporting at its best can be beautiful writing. It is over fifty years old, but it is indeed timeless, which is due to the writing and only the writing. The author is Joseph Mitchell, who is among the best reporters ever. The following bit from the story called "Mazie" was originally published in *The New Yorker*, and it has been a steady inspiration to me and to countless other reporters:

Mazie has presided for twenty-one years over the ticket cage of the Venice Theatre, at 209 Park Row, a few doors west of Chatham Square, where the Bowery begins. . . .

Sitting majestically in her cage like a raffish queen, Mazie is one of the few pleasant sights of the Bowery. She is a short,