

FNP 21

Interviewee: Ricky Bragg

Interviewer: Kelley Benham

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Q: You have a reputation as being one of the best storytellers in newspapers today. Where did you develop that skill?

A: Well, I come from a long line of liars and story tellers. Much of my family was illiterate, but they were great storytellers in an oral sense. When I was a little boy I would sit at the feet of my father, grandfather, uncles and their drinking buddies and listen to them tell tales on the front porch of our old house after supper on Sunday night.

They were masters of drama, and comedy, and tragedy. They told stories about strange men in Korea who kept coming at them even after they had shot them twice, they told stories about dogs that could climb a tree, about mean women in Rome, Georgia, who kept a razor kept down the neck of their blouse.

The stories started out mostly true, but the more whiskey they drank, the more the truth was sacrificed to the story. All I try to do in my work is weave in all that tragedy, drama and comedy, but stay true.

Some people say I write like a woman. I'm not sure what that means. But I do know that my father's story telling was only half of my education. While he and the men would talk about blood and sport and fish as big as a bulldog, my mother and her sisters would hold court around my grandmother in the kitchen and tell gentler stories about babies born, funerals that were "beautiful," and the nicer, sadder, sweeter side of growing up in rural Alabama in the 1960s and 1970s.

Q: You answered that question like you were writing one of your newspaper stories.

A: I don't know any other way to talk.

Q: A lot of journalists today seem to come from the same middle class and upper-middle class backgrounds. But you didn't grow up that way, did you?

A: Not damn hardly. My momma was abandoned by my daddy three times, for months or years. He finally left us for good when I was 10 or 11, I think, and died from alcoholism and tuberculosis when I was in the tenth grade.

That doesn't mean he didn't have an influence, only that much of it was bad. He left me with a few skills. He taught me that if a batter gets a good hit off you, then the next time he comes to the plate, throw a fastball at his head. He taught me that if a man is kicking your ass in a fist fight, it is honorable to hit him with a rock,

or a bottle, or to try to thumb out one of his eyes.

He also left me with some books. At a time when the kids my age were dropping out of school to work in the cotton mill or as a pulpwooder, my daddy encouraged me to read. He bought books by the pound and gave them to me in cardboard boxes. He had no idea what to buy. There would be a copy of *All the Kings Men* by Robert Penn Warren beside sheer and utter trash, paperbacks with half-naked nurses and titles like "Young Surgeon in Love." But there would also be the complete Tarzan series, or *Innocents Abroad*, or Edgar Allen Poe. When people ask me how did I learn to write, who were my influence, the truth is, everyone.

But while I owe my father for those gifts, that probably altered my life, he was a thoroughly worthless man. He left my mother to raise three sons and never seemed to care if we were going ragged or even hungry . . .

Q: What about your mom?

A: My momma took up the slack. She picked cotton for a living in a time just before the big mechanical cotton pickers took over, working in red-dirt fields with poor blacks and white trash who had no other skills and no other possibilities. She worked as a maid, and she took in ironing and washing for other people. She worked as a waitress in A.G. Baggett's Truck Stop. With the help of her sisters, she kept us in clothes and groceries.

Q: You won a national award for a story on her . . .

A: The story that won that award was more a tribute than anything else; I didn't really give a damn if anybody else read it, but I wanted her to see it. It was supposed to be a column on Mother's Day, but the features editor at the *St. Petersburg Times* wanted to make it a centerpiece with pictures of my mom. When I sent her a copy of the story, and talked to her on the phone, her only comment was: "I didn't know that anyone ever noticed." I think what she meant was, that no one thought that what she was doing was anything special.

Q: Tell me about the place you were born and how you grew up.

A: Believe it or not, I started to come into this world about halfway through the first ever Calhoun County showing of *The Ten Commandments*. My momma and daddy were at the Midway Drive-In, about halfway between Anniston and Jacksonville Alabama. My momma started going into labor and they took the speaker off the window and headed the car toward Piedmont. There were hospitals closer by, but the one in Piedmont was cheaper. My momma blushes and refuses to talk about the details of my birth, but I have it on good authority that I was either born in the parking lot of Piedmont hospital, or sooner. Momma

won't say.

I grew up in the little communities that lie in the foothills of the Appalachians. It's cotton farming country, punctuated with mountains so green that they can almost hurt your eyes. Most of my life we lived in the communities of Roy Webb, Williams, and Possum Trot. Possum Trot's main distinction was that it was the place people went to take off unwanted dogs. They'd put the poor dog in the trunk of the car, drive out to this isolated community and dump them out, then drive away fast. It may seem inhumane, but it was better than buckshot. The one good thing about it was we were never short on dogs.

Q: What was it like being a child of the civil rights era?

A: [Nods.] I still remember going to Anniston, Alabama and seeing George Wallace stand on the stage at the Anniston Auditorium and talk about "nigras" and if we—if my momma and daddy and aunts and uncles and cousins—would vote for him he would protect our way of life. That always sounded kind of funny to me, seeing as how we lived in a shack and had virtually nothing except some raggedy-ass car and other people's throwaway dogs. I was only a child then, but I was smart enough to know that most of the people in this room—pipe shop workers, farmers, soldiers from Ft. McClellan and other blue-collar folks—lived pretty much the same way that we did. Maybe their life was a few pegs higher than the black folks, but I'm not sure it was anything worth protecting.

Q: What was your own family's personal feelings about integration?

A: Back then, integration was one of those \$25 words that the politicians in suits talked about. But despite what people think, it was not a preoccupation with us. Until I was 6, I had never even seen a black person, except on a few occasions we saw them when we went to buy groceries in town, and that was rare . . .

. . . But something happened when I was 6 or maybe 7, when my daddy got a job at a body and fender shop in a nearby community called Spring Garden. He moved us out of the little house that I had grown up in surrounded by my mother's relatives, and he took us about 25 miles away to this isolated little place—well I guess it wasn't anymore isolated than where I had grown up—and rented this tumble-down, old two-story white house—what used to be the beautiful main house of a big farm . . .

. . . There was a small colony of black folks who lived in the old sharecroppers' houses less than a mile away down a dirt road. And it was through their children that we had our first exposure and experiences with blacks. At first it was ugly. We threw rocks at them, and they threw rocks back. But then we slowly but surely—I guess out of curiosity more than anything else—got to know each other a

little bit. One of them, I remember, had a head too big for his body, and we called him Water Head. We would go swimming together and talked for long hours about why their hair was the way it was and why their palms looked just like ours. We operated out of ignorance, and I'm sure this might even sound a little insulting to many black folks in the current racial climate we live in, but it seems now that our innocent questions about our differences were kind of nice, kind of sweet.

Q: You have a reputation, even in a business full of liberals, of being even more so. Did anything else happen to you as a child to help shape your attitudes and politics?

A: Well, first off, I don't really have any politics but I sure have some attitudes. That same year that we lived in the big old white house my daddy decided to hit the road for a while, so he took every single penny we had in the house and just left. We didn't have any money, and my momma didn't have a job, and I think she was just too proud to ask any of her relatives for help. I remember we ate a lot of cornbread and buttermilk. I distinctly remember at least a few times being hungry. One of the old women—I think there were a couple of them in that little cluster of houses where the black folks lived—must have heard about it. Maybe it was something we said or did. And they started showing up at my momma's door with food. It wasn't much, sometimes it was just corn, but it was something. That will alter your attitudes about race, something that no amount of pontificating by the George Wallaces of the world will ever be able to change.

Q: It seems to me that the current racial climate would be disappointing to you.

A: It is, very much so. I hear Farrakahn [Minister of the Nation of Islam] and David Duke, Al Sharpton and that fat boy—what's his name again? You know, the loud mouth . . . [Rush] Limbaugh. For some reason when I hear his name it always makes me think of cheese—and I hear them spouting off in their own specific varieties of racism and it makes me sick. I realize that race is more complicated now than it was then, that affirmative action and other modern-day issues divide us, but it ought not to be that way. Part of the problem is the economy and the fact that there are just fewer plums on the tree for all of us to reach for, and that is naturally going to cause friction. But I have seen people of both colors—but I have seen the absolute worst in people of both colors—and the absolute best, and I believe we could all get along if a few divisive loudmouth pecker-heads would try to find a new line of work.

Q: Tell me something about your education.

A: I went to elementary schools where your ability to spit a long way, or take a punch, was more important than the New Math. I loved to read, but I also loved to

throw rocks, ride horses, go hunting, catch fish, swim naked, kiss girls, wreck motorcycles and act a fool . . .

Q: Were you interested in journalism at all then?

A: I was an editor on my school paper, in high school, because everybody knew journalism class was easy and you could tell the teacher you were working on a story and instead go shoot basketball in the gym. When I edited the stories of my reporters, I was impressed by how deadly dull they were. At this point I had already started to read some Faulkner, and Truman Capote, and Tom Wolfe, and more popular, modern-day authors like James Clavell, and I knew it didn't have to be that way. I knew that newspaper stories could have strong images. All we had to do was think a little, which is hard at 17. At 17, I am convinced, I was mildly retarded. I had no real plan for college. I remember thinking, as I neared the end of my senior year in high school, that driving a UPS truck seemed like a pretty good job.

Q: What happened?

A: I took one course in the fall of 1977, and it probably saved my life. I took a feature writing course at Jacksonville State University in Alabama—we lived about 15 minutes away—and as I was doing a solidly mediocre job in that class I got a job offer from the weekly *Jacksonville News*. They wanted a young person they could pay virtually nothing to write the sports column. The only job I had ever really had up until then was pick-and-shovel work, so I thought I was in heaven. They paid me to write. It was like stealing . . .

Q: Did you ever feel like it hurt you, not having a degree?

A: I think it hurt me more in a personal way. I regret every day the four years I could have had learning some things. But even more than that I regret the four years I could have had to extend my childhood a little bit. I think a lot of college students take for granted the fact that they have been given a four-year pardon from having to enter the real, harsh world of making a living. And I envy them . . .

When I was 32 and had been working for what seemed like half my life I won a Nieman fellowship to Harvard University, which I am sure made me the least-educated person to ever walk into Harvard. And as much as I loved the chance to study and to be part of that rarefied, academic world, I still long sometimes for a Saturday night football game in Jacksonville, Alabama, or drinking an illegal beer with people my age talking about nothing more complicated than a history test, or women. Well, okay, women are pretty complicated. But it didn't seem so back then. But going back to your first question, I'm not sure what I missed in the classroom at a small southern college

was more important to me in the long run than being able to experience life in a newsroom so early on. I guess it was a pretty fair trade.

Q: Let's move on to your Alabama jobs.

A: The ten years I spent with Alabama newspapers, before moving on down to Florida, gave me the best foundation for big-time journalism that I could ever imagine. I was a sportswriter at first, because it was the only job I could get. At the *Anniston Star*, I covered Bear Bryant, Shug Jordan, and I covered Richard Petty. Richard Petty once ran over my big toe. He was whipping his car into the garage after qualifying at Alabama International Motor Speedway in Talladega, and I was standing with my foot stuck out right in his way. It only hurt for a minute, 'cause those cars have those big, soft tires. And he got out and apologized, and told me I really ought not to have had my foot stuck out in the way.

But the great thing about being a sportswriter is that you get to write with imagination, with color and detail. And I think, I really believe, that that made me a better writer further on down the road. I was working at a paper called the *Anniston Star* . . . when I got into a mild skirmish with my sports editor. It involved everything short of me knocking his teeth down his throat, and the managing editor, to get me away from him, made me a real reporter. They moved me to the desk where I covered two rural counties. I wrote about speed-trap towns, cock fights, a triple murder and a little place called Mars Hill, and just in general had a ball. It occurred to my editors that I would probably be more valuable writing about these things in a news-feature, big-picture, front-page sort of way than it was to have me sitting in city council meetings growing calluses on my ass . . . I have never made any apologies about being the designated pretty writer.

Q: Okay. What about your first big newspaper job?

A: The *Birmingham News*, a sadly conservative, consistently mediocre newspaper in the state's largest city, offered me a job in the mid '80s, and it was just a little while until I was doing the same kind of stories there. I did series on the slow death of Alabama's coal mining towns, on prison conditions, on truck drivers who were killing Alabamians by the dozens because of poor regulations. A series of stories I did on an Alabama preacher wrongly convicted of killing his wife cleared the minister's name, but that story, while it probably helped my career, is also probably my greatest failure, at least my greatest regret.

Q: Why?

A: Because it was only half done. I knew through my reporting who the real killer was, and we even raised his name in the newspaper, opening ourselves to

lawsuits if I'd been wrong. But while I did point this man out in the newspaper, it wasn't enough to convince authorities, so he is still free, still living down in south Georgia . . .

Q: Is [Birmingham] where you kicked in a locked door at a crime scene?

A: The was not locked.

Q: No?

A: It was nailed shut. And the building supervisor specifically told me that if the door was not locked with a key—then it was okay for me to go inside. He didn't say a damn thing about no big old ten penny nail holding it shut. And I didn't really kick it. I just sort of nudged it with my foot. Firmly.

Q: Well, what did you find when you got inside?

A: There had been a killing by this man with a long history of mental illness. He had been in and out of institutions and he had been released the most recent time for reasons that were not real specific. I could see through the window that he had spray painted what seemed to be a confession on the wall of the living room. It turned out that wasn't what it was, but since I'd already kicked the door down I went on inside anyway.

Q: Is it true that you once kicked a Rubbermaid trash can all the way across the *Birmingham News* newsroom and took out the book editor?

A: Yes it is. I was nonplused. I love that word "nonplused."

Q: Are you prone to become hysterical and scream at editors and call them low-life sons of bitches?

A: No, not a word of that is true. Okay, some of it is true, but not if I respect them. And just lately, I respect the people I work for. In St. Pete I worked for some of the best word people I could ever imagine, and while the *New York Times* is full of frustrations, they're all little ones, and for the most part I've been allowed to write the way I like to write, pick my own stories, and be proud of what I do.

Q: It sounds like the frustrations in Birmingham were bigger. Why did you leave?

A: I worked for a conservative editorship that didn't like to take many chances ... and I was always fighting with them They killed a story or two, so I decided to quit. I sent resumes to several mid-sized papers—I had won a bunch of state and regional awards over the past several years, which mid-sized papers tend to

like—and I was lucky I had several places to pick from including St. Petersburg, which at the time had a reputation as being a paradise for good writers. I went and talked to Managing Editor Michael Foley, who said after a few minutes, so, are you a pain in the ass? And I said yes. And he said, well, I don't see any reason why we can't hire you. In March of—I think it was '89—I went to the Clearwater bureau of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Q: They still talk about one story you did.

A: [Laughs.] What happened was, I had a run of some pretty good stories—page-one pieces on an old woman holding out against developers, serious stories like that—and the editors in St. Pete had already decided after just a couple of months that they were going to put me on the state desk. But—and I'm still not sure they didn't do this on purpose—there was still one last bullshit story that I had to do, the kind that makes you roll your eyes and shake your head, or just hang it.

In Dunedin there had been a rash of chicken maulings by a bobcat. The editor said, Rick, go up there to Dunedin and get the skinny on this. I did it. I didn't whine. But I convinced myself that somehow I would make them pay. I went up and interviewed a chicken that had survived an attack, losing only a considerable amount of its featherage and perhaps its dignity, considering where those feathers were torn from. I went back to the paper and wrote this lead: Mopsy has stared into the face of death, and it is whiskered. I thought that they would say, okay, we finally pushed the boy too far, but instead I got a note saying, great lead. I always have had an odd talent for diving head first into the septic tank and coming up smelling like roses.

Q: What was your first state staff job?

A: I was a state reporter covering southern Florida and had the freedom to roam around the southern half of the state, excluding Miami. I wrote about poachers, mercury poisoning in the Everglades, and the editors brought me back to St. Pete to write about the birth and death of Siamese twin babies.

Q: You won the American Society of Newspaper Editors award for that story.

A: That was the Distinguished Writing Award for non-deadline. Mike Foley called me up and said, well, Butt Plug, you've won a big one. Foley always had remarkable tact in situations like that.

Q: But most of your time at the paper was spent in Miami.

A: Yeah, at least three quarters. I didn't speak any Spanish, and I'd never even been to Miami, but I begged them for the job. Miami in the early '90s had to be

the most exotic, dangerous and weirdly beautiful city in the country, and I just had to do it. John Costa, the deputy managing editor, in announcing the move wrote: one of them, Bragg or Miami, will have to give.

I rented a house in Coconut Grove and the first night someone stole my stereo, but that was OK. I think for the first time in my life, I had found a home. I loved Miami the way some men love women. I wrote about Haitian refugees, anti-Castro guerillas, brutal cops, pitiful crack whores, riots—I still don't hear real good out of one ear because I got hit with a chunk of concrete during a riot in Liberty City—and black churches as a haven from the violence of inner-city Miami.

I traded my 1966 convertible Mustang for a 1969 Pontiac Firebird convertible . . . I worked my ass off on good stories and spent my weekends fishing, or bobbing up and down in the water on South Beach. It was probably the happiest time in my life . . .

Q: But the [*St. Petersburg Times*] used you on stories that demanded more tough reporting than pretty writing.

A: Well, I think there's a bias in this business that if you're a good writer you're nothing but a pretty pen, and if you're a good reporter you can't possibly be a good writer, and that's kind of silly. There is no good writing without really, really good reporting. I know I'm not the first one to say that but it's true.

As the build-up for the Gulf War began, the editors in St. Pete decided they should send me for a while, even just a little while, to write about it . . . I wrote about Jewish soldiers who were forced to hide their religion—some of them even had to say their prayers in a closet, and had the Star of David removed from their dog tags—so as not to offend their Saudi hosts. The U. S. military did not like that story worth a goddamn, not that I gave a shit, because I was going home anyway.

Q: At the time a lot of Americans didn't think any American fighting men should be there. How'd you feel about it?

A: On the way to Saudi Arabia, I bumped into a middle-aged sergeant who was leading a platoon of men who would ultimately fight in the war . . . and he talked about how ridiculous it was for him to be risking his life in a war over cheap gasoline. He said, I guess I'm here to protect the American right to drive a Cadillac. I know this man was not a coward because he'd fought in Vietnam and was only months away from full retirement. He could have gotten out of his duty but now, in a completely different time in his life, he was risking it again. I remember thinking that I was seeing what true guts was about. He didn't have blind devotion to his country or any cause, but he was doing it anyway because it

was better, to him at least, than any job he would've had outside the military . . .

One more thing sticks in my mind about that sergeant. American journalists had been fond of reporting that this was a dangerous war for Americans because so many of the Iraqi soldiers were said to be zealots and not afraid to die. When I asked the American sergeant what he thought of that he just laughed out loud. Son, everybody's afraid to die.

Q: Why did they send you to Haiti?

A: Because I wanted to go. I had always had a moth-to-a-flame fascination with Haiti, and when President Aristide was forced to leave the country and they killed so many people that first night, I thought we had to go and explain it, somehow. Here is a nation just a few hundred miles off the coast of Florida . . . that was filling Florida up with refugees on rickety rafts. I just thought it was important. The story I wrote from Haiti I think is still one of the best things I've ever done. It's a little purple, but that's all right. I saw so much death that I foolishly thought I would never see anything like it again . . .

Q: What did seeing that much death do to you?

A: It's not easy to talk about, but I can talk about it. You don't have to go to Haiti to discover what death is about. You see it in the breezeways of housing projects in poor neighborhoods in places like New Orleans and Birmingham, and certainly Miami. Especially Miami. In Haiti, it was just more common. And the commonness of it hammers at your shell.

The first night I spent in Haiti I spent in the city cemetery, where hundreds of thousands of crypts rise like a little city up out of the grounds, where hundreds of thousands more are buried underneath. I remember interviewing this young man who had gone searching for his father's crypt—his father had been killed by Haitian soldiers on a lark, purely because he happened to be standing in a doorway, an easy target—but there had been so many burials in the past few days the crypt keeper could not remember where he had buried him. I wrote a line that said how the young man climbed to the top of a cross on one of the crypts, hoping he could spot his father's burial place from there, but all he could see was his own future: a life in the slums nearby ending in an anonymous death in this place. I guess the most accurate way to describe what Haiti did to me, was it broke my heart.

Q: Were you in any danger?

A: Not really. The danger is always that you'll be caught in the middle of the warring factions. Sometimes people just get in the way of a bullet. It happens in housing

projects all the time . . . I got roughed up a little: a couple of times in crowds and once at the airport, leaving. But it was no big thing. I slept in a Holiday Inn, for God's sake, and if it hadn't been for the bodies outside in the street in the morning, I could have been in Fort Meyers.

Q: So the Haitians you interviewed were in more danger than you. How did you get their stories without putting them at risk?

A: The great danger in a place like that is that you'll get somebody else killed because you're clumsy, because you assume that you're just slicker and smarter than you are . . . I interviewed people in pitch-black rooms. I interviewed people by having them lie down on the floor of my Jeep as I drove in circles around the city. And I tried to do everything I could to protect those people. Well, let's put it this way. I can live with a lot, but I don't think I could live with the fact that I got somebody killed because I was just stupid.

Q: Were you criticized at home because you didn't name all of your sources?

A: The people who criticized me—one guy said I was personally responsible for the invasion of Haiti because Clinton quoted from my stories in his State of the Union address—have never been anywhere even remotely close to that kind of story, or to that kind of danger. I'm not trying to make it sound melodramatic, because while I did get shot at there, I did not have—as so many Haitians had—some soldier walk up to my head, stick a pistol to my head and kill me at point-blank range. I don't like unnamed sources, and I very rarely use them. I probably use them less than one half of one percent—probably much less than that. But in Haiti it was the only way to protect those people . . . invariably the only people who ask those questions would pee in their pants and cry for their momma the first time some bad man starting pumping a twelve-gauge shotgun into the crowd that surrounds you. I don't think those people have ever seen the sheer abject terror that comes into the eyes of people who realize if they don't run fast enough and far enough, they're going to die right there. And if they don't cover their face soon enough, somebody will come to their house later that night and rape their children, murder their wife and drag them off to kill them. I hope this doesn't sound a little thin-skinned, but I have never had much respect for people in this business who are all mouth. My daddy would have said, you don't have enough ass in your britches to say that about me. Pat Buchanan called me a liar on national TV. He said I had exaggerated the killing. Of course the closest he's ever come to Haiti was, well, he ain't never come nowhere close to Haiti.

But the editors of the *New York Times* liked [the stories], and they put them on the front page, and I respect the editors of the *New York Times* a hell of a lot more than I do some Republican pun'kin head who thinks America would be a great place if everybody was just white, Christian and belonged to the country

club.

I think stories have an impact. I doubt seriously if they forced the invasion of Haiti. I think that a steady drumbeat of stories about human rights abuses in Haiti in the *New York Times* definitely influences policy makers. I think that's a given and it's something I've never been really comfortable with. I'm still not really comfortable with it.

Q: What about it makes you uncomfortable?

A: Well I guess it's a trade. We like it when our stories do some good. We like it when our stories bring about change in a good way. I liked it when the story I did about the old washerwoman in Mississippi resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions for scholarships for poor children. So I guess I have to accept the fact that these stories can have other consequences. We put this stuff in the paper because we have proved as sufficiently as we can that it's true. At the *Tallahadega Daily Home*, if I misspelled a running back's name, all I was going to do was make his momma mad at me. If I get something wrong in the *New York Times*, well let's just say the consequences are greater.

Q: I want to go back to Florida, and why that state in general and Miami in particular was such an important place in your career so far.

A: I think it's just because this state, bar none, is the best place to be a reporter in this country. Hell, maybe in any country. The variety of people and the variety of problems coupled with geography make it the best state for stories. I believe that Florida is where I really flexed what little bit of literary muscle I have. And I think it made me a better writer, and it sure as hell made me a better reporter. And if you think about Florida as this very dysfunctional, dangerous, but mildly entertaining family, then Miami has to be the uncle they keep chained in the attic.

My very first day in Miami, Nelson Mandela was being honored by a union group there and the town—which is split along racial lines in the best of times—had come apart completely over his visit. Black folks of course worshiped him for the obvious reasons, but the Cubans, angry that he had once embraced Fidel Castro, were seething. I drove out to Miami Beach, parked my car, and the very first thing I saw when I looked up was Cuban folks and black folks picking up dried horse manure from the street and throwing it at each other. The horse manure was there because the city had decided it was necessary to use mounted police officers to try to keep them from killing each other. I went and got myself a can of pineapple juice at a little bodega, walked back to the steps of the civic center, propped myself up comfortable and settled in for the show. I thought to myself, Lord, I have found me a home. This is the honest-to-God truth.

And someone at the Nieman Foundation program at Harvard – I'm still not real sure who it was – mailed me an application and a blank envelope. All my life I had carried a chip on my shoulder because of my lack of education, or at least my lack of a formal education. I had spent my career proving that I didn't need it. So it was kind of ironic that I would want it after I felt I'd finally showed I could do without it. To make the proverbial long story short, I applied for it and was one of the 12 American fellows selected for '92-'93.

It took me out of Miami the same week that Hurricane Andrew slammed in. It destroyed my little house and many of my belongings. I don't believe in signs, but this would have been a pretty powerful one that it was time to move on.

Q: So how was Harvard?

A: Weird. And delightful. Here I was, in the best university in the whole world and it was free and open to me for a whole year. Some people spend their Nieman years just hanging out, or writing their memoirs, but I studied. I studied African-American history and culture, Latin American history and culture, Afro-Caribbean history and culture, women's history, U. S. diplomacy, religion, and I shot a lot of basketball. But mostly what I did was talk to [Bill] Kovich [Head of the Nieman Foundation], the smartest man I know. We talked about newspapers and about writing and about life as we know it. I didn't know my own father all that well, but there were times when I wished he had been Kovich . . .

Q: So what did you do when you got back to the *St. Petersburg Times*?

A: Paul Tash, the new executive editor, made the decision to shut down the Miami bureau and promoted me—at least I guess that's what it was—to roving national reporter. What they said was, do whatever you want to, find the best stories you can, and we'll let you go. And that's what they did. I spent a month on the Navajo Indian reservation writing about the hantavirus and about the Navajo uranium miners who were slowly dying of cancer. I went to a small town in Texas to write about the last black resident who was being threatened by the Klan, and ultimately would be run out of town. I covered the floods in the Midwest.

Q: You were only there a few months. What happened?

A: Two phone calls that summer changed my life profoundly: one from the *Los Angeles Times*, the other from the *New York Times*. They offered me jobs at exactly the same time, leaving me with what some people called a delicious decision to make, but looking back on it, it was pure hell . . .

Bill Kovich and Howell Raines, a fellow Alabamian, both told me that I should go to New York. They affirmed what the *Times* had told me, that the *Times* was

changing, that they were letting at least some of their reporters write, really write, and were not trying to turn everybody into a good little *New York Times* reporter in a bow tie and horned-rimmed glasses. Kovich called me at home one night and said, you only get one chance in life to pitch for the Yankees or sing at the Met. Raines just puffed up and said, boy, this train don't swing by people like you and me more than once. So I figured whatever decision I made was do-or-die. I decided to go to L. A., which would be one of many large mistakes in my life.

Q: What happened?

A: The short version: they didn't keep their promises. I knew immediately that this dream job would not work out in a practical sense. So I quit. After three weeks. I called *The New York Times* and said I had made a mistake. They left me waiting for seven minutes while they talked amongst themselves, I guess. Then the hiring editor called me back and said the same job was still open if I wanted it. So I took it and moved to New York in January 1994. Maybe I should point out here that this was the coldest winter they'd had in years.

Q: And how did you fit in?

A: From the beginning, it was almost like a dream. They let me chase my own ideas and let me write. I wrote about the homeless, about inner-city killings that left the walls of buildings covered with testimonials to the dead, and just in general, wrote about the saddest, most poignant corners of the city. After six months of this, they sent me to Haiti to cover the human rights abuses and the build-up to the return of Aristide and the possibility of an armed intervention. Again, I wrote about the killing and worse the people there inflicted on each other. Got five—or got four—death threats, and slept poorly. I got a call from the national editor telling me not only that they were going to send me back South, to cover the Deep South for the *New York Times* but that they would have done it even sooner except that I was preoccupied with Haiti. So in my first nine months, I'd worked on the metro, national and foreign desks, had my stories nominated for Pulitzers, and won several smaller awards. I don't guess things could have gone much better . . .

I wouldn't trade a Pulitzer for my Nieman fellowship, and the year of free and clear life it gave me, and I wouldn't trade it for the bully pulpit that I have at *The New York Times*, where my stories can actually alter people's lives for good. Stepping over bodies someplace kind of makes winning a plaque—even if it's this very special one—well, let's just say it puts it in perspective. I'd still love to win it, but I wish I could have won it back when I was still young enough to use it to get women.

Q: I can't believe you just said that.

A: What? I've done waxed philosophical about journalism, got all net up. I could have said used it to snake babes.

Q: At your writing seminars you talk about how newspapers are digging their own graves with short, cute stories. Does it bother you that you have devoted so much of your life to a profession that some people believe is dying?

A: It's only dying because it is so poorly managed. While it's true people read less, while it's true that it is difficult to marry up with technology, I think the main reason that so many newspapers are failing is because they're being run without imagination, with an eye only on profits and just generally stump-dumb and butt-stupid. You've got large newspapers like the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* trying to compete with television with short, quick, dumb piece-of-shit stories. And you've got small newspapers all over the country trying to emulate *USA TODAY*, a newspaper that, at its very best, is bad. Well we can't be TV and we ought not try to be. We've never really reached ignorant, vapid people with newspapers. To read newspapers you've got to want to read, and we insult those people every day with the crap we turn out. Good writing has given away to cute writing, and a clever turn of phrase seems to be worth more than an investigative piece or a heart-felt feature. I've had cab drivers in Atlanta talk about how there was nothing to read in the *J-C.*, while doctors and other professionals won't even pick it up. My doctor, who is a gastro-whatever it is, what do you call a gut doctor?—anyway, he said very appropriately, it don't have no guts. I thought that was funny . . .

I got into this business at the time of Watergate, in a time when investigative journalism was entering a really great era. And I followed it through my whole youth, and now I'll ride it out into old age. And if I really am in the end of a dying business—let me put it this way: seeing the end of this business—then that's fine. 'Cause I'm not real sure it can go much further down the toilet. There is such a thing as mercy killing.

Q: So what would you do different?

A: That's part of the problem. I'm too selfish to ever want to go into management. A story is what it's all really about and that's all I really care about. The thought of running some small newspaper somewhere, of trying to put together the kind of newsroom where reporters are excited about their work – you know, the kind of place where they slap high fives when they come back from pinning the city councilman up against the wall with their question, or writing a lead so good they have to get up from their terminal and walk it off—that is very seductive. But anyway, in a practical—or at least as practical as I can be—answer to that question, the first and most obvious thing is to turn the attention of your newspapers away from bar graphs and pie charts and all this other shit, away from what one paper refers to as “containables”—those little short pieces that

don't have to jump from the front page—and line up every single copy editor or slot man or backfield editor who believes any story can be told in eight inches or less and slap the mortal shit out of them.

I'd encourage writers to take chances not in their reporting so much as in their writing. Everybody is not a stylist. Everybody is not intended to write like Tennessee Williams after a half-bottle of whiskey. But one reason that there is so much damn deadly-dull writing in this country is because writers are being told by their editors to "save it for your novel."

Q: You've lived in 14 cities in about as many years. Do you like living that way?

A: I think I used to. I'm like everyone else, when you get to be about 36. I'd sort of like to have a puppy, but it would starve. I'd like to think about maybe buying a house, but I wouldn't get to live in it. It'll change someday.

Q: When?

A: When I'm old.

Q: What are you going to do when you're old?

A: I'm going to try to have a puppy.

[End of the interview.]