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A Writing Career

By Louise Milligan

I grew up in Legoland writ large. Big brick veneer houses on small blocks treed with conifers and covered with tan bark. It was a happy place, but Wantirna, in Melbourne's outer east, can't be mythologised like Green Valley. I wanted out. As kids spent sunburnt summers playing cricket and splashing in backyard pools, I was in my bedroom reading Dickens and Austen and *Smash Hits* and *Time*. I dreamt of one day becoming either that glamorous woman on *LA Law* in the beige cavalry twill suit, or a Great Australian Novelist, or Jana Wendt, or all three. I sang Duran Duran and The Smiths songs into a hairbrush.

Mum was and is a medical receptionist and Dad was and is a manager of a computer company. Apart from a passing acquaintance with a Channel 10 reporter whom we saw at Mass on Sundays, we didn't know any journalists, or lawyers, or television people. Maybe if we had I wouldn't have been so keen to become one of them. In my final years of schooling, I chose humanities subjects like politics, English literature and history and aimed for law school. Duxing the school was a kick if only for the fact I didn't know the word "dux" existed before it happened. It was more than could be said for a certain student in the maths/sciences who practically had his speech written.

Law and Arts were the chosen degrees because they seemed more substantial than journalism. The Arts part was indulgent — crammed with English and philosophy, and eventually, honours in politics. The Law part was long. The lectures were interesting, the assignments stimulating, but the

exams and their lead-up were like slamming my head against a wall repeatedly. Despite my visions of going to the Bar, I was not cut out for the Law. I spent nights working the bar and being a "doorbitch" at a city nightclub and skipped lectures for a rather unspectacular part-time modelling career of department store catalogues, chocolate bar commercials and bridal magazines. I took a year out to do my honours thesis in international relations theory. It was a feminist, post-modernist analysis of the fashion industry as a global phenomenon and incredibly good fun. Foucault and *Vogue*! A latter-day Dickens and *Smash Hits*. After that, those last two years of Law were hideous.

The memory is duly repressed, but enduring it paid off. I then completed a graduate diploma in journalism at RMIT. Bringing the university total up to seven and a half years. Average for a serious academic, but long for a journalist. I was 26 when I entered the field in shiny Mary-Janes through a cadetship at *The Australian* – eight years older than a colleague at *The Herald Sun*. But the strong academic background, coupled with an obsessive desire to get a job, and good advice from as many mentors as I could find, had aided in being offered all three daily metro newspaper cadetships in Melbourne. I also worked on a pilot for Channel 10. Editors warm to potential cadets if they have travelled and worked in ordinary jobs. God help the ivory tower type who spends his job interview critiquing moral panics or mass media theory. Michael Gawenda, former editor of *The Age*, had his bullshit detector turned up to 11 when he asked for a summary of my feminist, post-modernist, international relations theory thesis for my 13-year-old cousin. Fortunately, I had spent plenty of time in the real world, whatever that is. I worked everywhere from a diner in a suburban shopping mall, to a medical clinic, to selling Armani and Moschino suits to the Glasgow *nouveau riche* (including a celebrated sale of a white jacket with a peace sign cut out of the back for a customer's daughter's First Holy Communion. Kath and Kim would have called it "noice"), to the door, the bar and quite literally stumbling up the catwalk.

Journalism requires a healthy dose of scepticism. Which can't help making you feel somewhat gauche when you're

writing about yourself. Even a lonely "I" in copy is enough to make even the most confident hack feel a little icky. But the scepticism is too often traded for cynicism. It's dreadfully uncool to care about things too much. That all changed for my generation of young reporters with Bali, and more recently, with the Asian tsunami. After four days of "death-knocking" the families of young people killed in the Sari Club bombings of October 2002, reporters in newsrooms around the country put their head on their desks and wept. For me, it was Jodie O'Shea. She was my age and a mobile dog-washer from Sutherland, the part of southern Sydney affectionately known as "The Shire". I'll never forget her eyes, staring out in pain from her bed in the Sanglah hospital where she lay covered in awful burns. This photograph of her sat on my desk for four days as I tried to find her family, until I received a telephone call to say she had died in her mother's arms. Jodie was the first Australian buried after the bombing. The sun beamed on the Shire and they played Neil Diamond.

A forensic pathologist I interviewed once referred to the bodies he examined as "the deadies". He didn't like to think too much about their lives or the pain they endured before they met their fate — an occupational hazard too heavy to bear. During my time as a court reporter in Sydney covering some of the country's most notorious murder cases, I collected some deadies of my own. But my job was to understand them and to know intimately of their pain and their killers' foibles and to translate it for readers.

There were the four Folbigg children, smothered in their sleep one by one over a decade by their deeply troubled mother Kathleen. They were largely forgotten until the day after the guilty verdict, when video footage of 19-month-old Laura was released. It was the day before her death. She wore floaties and toddled around a backyard pool. The Gonzales family were slashed and beaten to death in a delusional, guilty furore by their son and brother, Sef Gonzales, a compulsively lying Walter Mitty for our times. Janelle Patton was found wrapped carelessly in plastic in a paddock, and almost three years later the silence on Norfolk Island means her killer walks free.

Despite her physical desecration and character assassination in a coronial inquest, her loving parents are proud of her. Proud of the way she fought and her unconventional feistiness. Baby Jordan Anderson's toes were crushed with a fan clamp by his mother's boyfriend. Jaidyn Luke was murdered by his foster mother when his mother gave him up for the weekend because she had nowhere to live. And jealous ex-husband Steven Fraser drugged his three children with Mogadon and drowned them in the bath. He wrote, "I luv you" in felt-tip pen on their faces and hung their pet monkey from the roof to have the most disturbing effect on his estranged wife when she found them.

For me, leading in journalism has been about trying to eschew byte-sized reductionism for something that is often more uncomfortable and less easy to comprehend. It's the dark crevices of extreme poverty, depression and blind aspiration that create victims and perpetrators rather than simply what Hannah Arendt termed "the banality of evil". Sometimes evil is banal and sometimes people have simply, to trot out a rather tired cliché, forfeited their right to live in the community. But not always.

My latest venture is more challenging. It's wading through the scripted, media-managed mantra of the political world, which has discovered to great effect how to manage the visual media. Television operates to punishing deadlines and requires great pictures and good "grabs" as well as a cracking story. It's easier for politicians to escape its glare if they release their message late in the day, with no warning and as little explanation as possible. If they serve up everything and nothing on a plate. There are words to be written, pictures to be time-coded, a story to be edited and the ubiquitous "piece to camera" to be executed. This 10-second piece, where a journalist addresses the audience, can be stymied for 20 minutes by flies and wind and rain. And while the lady doth protest too much, who will listen to the message when all they can think about is the reporter's frizzy hair flying around the place? Frantic television journalists have taken to pooling vision and covering the same stories lest they be seen to be missing out on what the opposition has. Operating outside those boundaries risks missing the "story of

the day". So it's with great fear and trepidation that TV reporters boldly try to break a story of their own. But working in commercial television news brings with it a huge responsibility. Reaching more than a million viewers on a good day, the service will be for many their only news source. If a light can't be shined on the workings of the government and opposition they elected, you're failing them.

As for leadership in journalism, it's using the analytical skills you have acquired at university, but in a completely different way. It's a way that enlightens and educates and entertains everyone from your 13-year-old cousin to business leaders and housewives and bank clerks. It's swerving past punitive defamation laws, laughable Freedom of Information exemption clauses, publicity mavens and punishing deadlines on the way to a good story. It's having vanity or pretension battered out of you by drought-stricken farmers, grieving relatives, wily press secretaries and forthright editors. And having wonderful fun with it along the way. It's a privileged position to be an outside-insider, as journalists are. To ask impertinent questions of the powerful and the notorious. To go to amazing places and meet amazing people. Journalists regularly feature on the most-hated lists of professions. Any reporter who has had to follow up an unethical beat-up merchant can appreciate how the public feels. But despite globalised capital, shrinking media ownership, the increasing focus on entertainment above substance and a time-poor audience, democracy and culture still need us. I must bear that in mind the next time it rains when I'm doing a piece to camera.

Leadership is something rarely witnessed and even more rarely possessed. And after several years in journalism, although only recently covering politics, it seldom comes from publicly elected representatives or those employed to analyse their every move. Max Weber said journalism was a political vocation and that implies some degree of leadership. It was that I aspired to quite early in life.

Ms Louise Milligan

Louise Milligan is New South Wales State Political Reporter for the Seven Network and a former Courts and Legal Affairs Writer for The Australian.