

Learning Humility from the Lives of Soldiers Lost

I read *Final Salute* during this, my fifth year in Norfolk and finally realized why, until now, I'd felt like such an outsider whenever two or more military friends entered a group.

I had learned about military life from documentaries and my brother's one-year mandatory service an hour's bus ride from our house in Cyprus. I had memorized some of the (to me exotic) acronyms that stud their speech. I wrote a story that took place during a war. But I'd never felt anything, never hurt.

Reading *Final Salute*, Jim Sheeler's account of Marines whose job it was to notify families of the deaths of their sons in Iraq, that changed. For the first time I suffered a little. I felt, through the writing, enough of the pain of war to make me cry.

I learned from the book not just of the details of military protocol, or of the magnitude of the sacrifice our military makes while I am safe at home: I learned about myself. I learned about my often thankless take-it-all-for-granted approach to talk about "security." And I learned about humility, or how to get it.

The first thing I admired in Jim Sheeler was humility: he effaces his own story and efforts from the narrative, and calls five long years of research "nothing" compared to what the people in his book were called upon to give. I asked him how a path strewn with awards and accolades could bring him to such modesty. He said the feeling immediately, but deepened as he spent more time with them. For though the families he wrote about had "already given so much in private," they gave away that privacy and let a reporter tell the world about their pain.

Having spent so much time on the living room floor listening to them cry, knowing the lives they have to lead every day—if you're not humbled by it you don't deserve the story. You have to hurt, you have to cry, you have to realize whose stories they are.

Final Salute was five years in the writing. The *Rocky Mountain News* story that won the Pulitzer in 2006 took a few months to write, but the research for it began in 2003, with the first Colorado casualty of the Iraq War. Sheeler shadowed the Marine casualty assistance calls officer Major Steve Beck, the man whose point of view becomes, in *Final Salute*, the reader's window into a world of duty, comradeship and sacrifice. Sheeler followed Beck to the homes of families who'd lost a Marine, waiting outside while Beck delivered the news. Sheeler went to funerals, dozens of them, and received the grief and sadness he was later to communicate to readers in his book. It was exhausting. When publishers asked about making the winning article a book, Sheeler didn't even return their calls—he wasn't ready to go at the story again. Did that mean all good writing takes a long time, to settle in the writer's heart, to find its form?

Some stories can be written fast, Sheeler answered, just not this one—what's crucial in getting a different, gripping story is finding a "perspective no one is writing from." One of Sheeler's first assignments at the *Rocky Mountain News* was the return of the first Colorado casualty in the Iraq War, the Marine Tommy Slocum. While covering that story, the journalist realized that reporting the details of casualty notification and burial could give him a way of conveying the most important story—the cost of war to the servicemen and their families. Like any writer, Sheeler's mastery of his art grew out of a dedicated, observant apprenticeship to the old masters. In our

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interview, Sheeler mentioned Jimmy Breslin's well-known piece on Kennedy's funeral, which focuses on the man who dug the grave. He uses this seemingly simple piece as a model for his journalism students.

For Sheeler, focusing on ordinary people to tell extraordinary stories is something of a trademark. His earlier book, *Obit*, bears the subtitle "Inspiring Stories of Ordinary People who Led Extraordinary Lives." The author's decision to make obituaries into narratives, stories of each person's life, seems extraordinary in its own right. Students of mine at Old Dominion University who read *Obit* in preparation for Sheeler's reading expressed surprise at how the forty obituaries feel like "real stories"—stories that demanded to be read by them, my dear, restless, video-loving freshmen. Having seen nothing like these unassuming gem of a book before, my students surmised that story-long obituaries "must just be a small-town thing."

Actually, it's a Jim Sheeler thing. While working the "graveyard beat" at *Boulder Planet*, *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News*, he would go into the homes of those who'd lost their loved one, and take out a notebook. Sheeler found that once people realized that he had time for them, and was ready to risk his own comfort in order to listen to anything they had to say—no matter how horrific or painful—then, they wanted to talk.

Sheeler's experience researching his narrative obituaries prepared him to write the feature "Final Salute." He learned how to be comfortable in front of people who are grieving, how to listen in a way that made the experience cathartic for the people he interviewed. While most reporters dread the awkwardness of having a story to gain from a person who's already given away all their happiness, all their peace, Sheeler realized that he had something to give, too. To the aching hearts of the bereaved, who are "inundated by awkward condolences," half-felt sympathy cards, and perfunctory handshakes, Sheeler gave genuine interest in the lives of those who had passed on. His questions created a past, a history made real in language. His writing gave a voice to the life lessons that could be learned both from the deceased, and from the mourning who in that "raw emotional state" speak the kind of truths we find in the book. And those deep yet simple insights, Sheeler noted in the interview, is "something that I'm constantly looking for—what I want to know is what can you take away." The "death beat" rookie reporters often think of the "Siberia of the newsroom" as a place for "doing their time," but it is, he says, really "one of the best places in the paper," for breaking news will be fish wrap in a couple days, whereas the obituaries, "they still hold up. They will be put in scrapbook."

Sheeler is "always looking for stories that last," he explained; with attention to detail, and a keen eye for the meaning behind events, "we can take everyday life and really infuse a paper story with the poignancy that is so often there if you take the time to listen." The story that will last, he explained, is to be found in the shadows.