

In His Sights

Walt Harrington

is hunting for extraordinary stories.

by Robert Bittner

"I wanted to fit in with my wife's family," says journalist Walt Harrington. "When they said, 'We go hunting,' and I was given a 12-gauge shotgun as a gift, I figured it would be rude not to join them. I was roped into it, essentially."

So began a decades-long series of trips to rural Kentucky, where Harrington eventually learned how to successfully hunt rabbits. But it's also where he received an unexpected education in being a better father, friend, and human being, a personal journey he explores in *The Everlasting Stream: A True Story of Rabbits, Guns, Friendship, and Family* (Atlantic Monthly Press).

Hunting changed Harrington's life. Not overnight. But slowly, and profoundly. The time spent in the woods with his father-in-law, Alex, and Alex's lifelong friends Bobby, Lewis, and Carl showed him a close-knit world of male friendship he had forgotten about as a modern, urban man. It was a world rich in inside jokes, shared memories, and an abiding, mostly unspoken respect for one another.

Even without the guns and blood-stained jackets, it was a world of men far different from the one Harrington knew in Washington, D.C., where he was a respected writer for *The Washington Post Magazine*.

Harrington was establishing a growing reputation writing in-depth profiles of important people—from George Bush to Jesse Jackson, from the Reverend Jerry Falwell to Anton LaVey, leader of the Church of Satan. His particular talent: going beyond the stereotypes and the easy, surface conclusions to truly understand the people at the heart of his stories.

"I came out of very straight, traditional journalism," he says. "I was influenced very much by the generation of journalism in the late 1960s—Robert Caro, David Halberstam—hard-hitting journalists who recognized that you couldn't understand the realm of the public world without understanding personalities and character. The parallel movement was the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese, and I was quite taken with what they were doing. As a result of being opened up to that, I went back and began to be a bit more systematic about reading the classic *New Yorker* work: John McPhee, John Hersey, Lillian Ross. Then I began to try to apply the lessons of this kind of journalism to what I was doing."

For someone used to interviewing high-profile politicians and personalities, telling the story of four aging, backwoods Kentucky hunters might seem like an odd choice. But Harrington had reached a point in his career when getting close to these men was the most natural choice he could make.



While writing *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America*, he had spent a year away from Washington, traveling the country in search of stories and insights about race. That time, coupled with his hunting trips to Kentucky, reminded him that "there is another world out there," a

world far away from the lifestyle of Caribbean vacations, art collections, and three-car garages he had embraced. Harrington didn't feel guilty about the comforts his success had allowed him and his family. But he also didn't feel satisfied.

"I had increasing interest in trying to find ways to do nonfiction on ordinary people, going into the lives of ordinary people," he says. "I've probably had that inclination from the time that I was a kid and a young reporter. I wanted to leave the *Post* because I needed a base from which I could pursue this kind of journalism."

But Harrington didn't just leave the *Post*. He left daily journalism altogether, accepting a teaching position at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There, he produced a highly influential journalism textbook (*Intimate Journalism*) and settled into his role as a professor. While many of his colleagues have enjoyed higher profiles and bestseller status, Harrington has chosen to work primarily behind the scenes as a proponent of "intimate journalism," meticulously reported nonfiction that nevertheless finds the drama and meaning in people's lives. He speaks at journalism conferences, leads in-house seminars for newspaper staff writers, and mentors new generations of journalists. All the while, he encourages writers to pursue the stories that fascinate them—and present those stories to the world in a compelling way.

"When I talk about intimate journalism, I'm trying to make a distinction between literary journalism that isn't intimate," Harrington explains. "I mean, you can find fine literary journalism about a piece of ice. I was trying to distinguish a kind of journalism that tried to make explicit the world of the people we're trying to write about. At the same time, there's an either/or distinction made by the people who come out of journalism and the people who come out of memoir and fiction writing." Sometimes, he says, the two camps have "very different ideas of factuality that are not always apparent to the average reader. I stick pretty closely to the journalistic level of accuracy and facts, even to the sound of birds in the background. Those birds need to be there, at the time I was there. Because of the failings of memory, you shouldn't have to rely on your memory. It should be in your notes, your tapes, specifically mentioned by people who are there. That makes what we do more

challenging and difficult [than writing memoir and fiction]. One, you've got to collect all this information. And, two, sometimes story and drama have to take a back seat to documentary accuracy."

Sometimes, maybe. But as Harrington's hunting trips continued—and as he drew closer and closer to his companions—he was reminded how much story and drama are part of everyone's daily lives. And he began to realize that the story of these men and their lives together was worth chronicling. As he continued to hunt for rabbits, Harrington also began hunting for the details that would bring their story to life.

"I began seriously thinking like a reporter, being more watchful and more careful about taking notes," he says. "I hooked up a voice-activated microphone to the lapel of my

hunting jacket and started carrying a camera. I took time to sit down and actually interview the men, being more systematic about pulling together the stories of their lives. I also started doing research on the natural world in which we hunted, talking to naturalists familiar with that part of the country so I'd have more grounding in that subject."

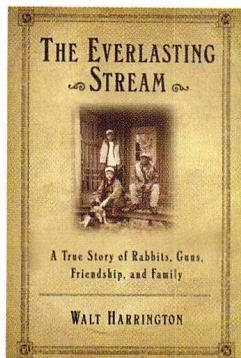
That level of journalistic diligence is a hallmark of Harrington's work—whether he's describing the creative process when a poet writes a poem, the daily trials of a woman coping with the diminishing strength of her elderly father, or his own struggle to stop treating

his teenage son, Matt, like a child when they go out with the other men to hunt.

"I once asked Matt what he believed to be the most important thing he had learned from hunting with Alex, Bobby, Lewis, and Carl,"

Harrington writes in *The Everlasting Stream*. "I thought he'd say something about how to shoot a gun or gibe a guy good. Matt thought for a moment and said, 'They started out with almost nothing, way poor. They still haven't got a lot. And they're happy. I mean, they're really happy.'"

Although Harrington is a trained and talented journalist, hunting taught him how to see with new eyes. To react to the sudden smear of brown fur as a rabbit jets out of the brush, yes—but also to better see the natural world and his place in it. "That ability to live life at the same time as you see it closely—without distancing yourself from the experience—is really the big challenge for reporters," he admits. "That's the thing I was able to experience while hunting." And that's something they don't teach at journalism school. **P**

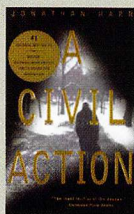


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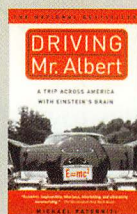
Telling a Great (True) Story

Walt Harrington is not alone in his love for intimate, narrative journalism.

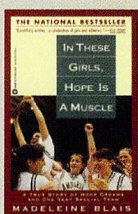
The following are some of the best narrative nonfiction published in the last decade.



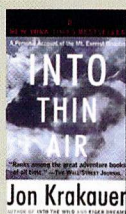
A CIVIL ACTION by Jonathan Harr. One young lawyer's fight against two of the nation's largest corporations accused of causing children's deaths.



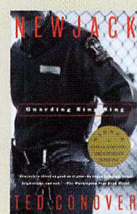
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