

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

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By Norman Sims

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The dozen years Adrian Nicole LeBlanc spent reporting for her book *Random Family* taught her about another quality of literary journalism that might be called the writer’s connection with her subjects. LeBlanc once called it “emotional reporting,” but she’s moving away from that description, and she’s not sure that Ted Conover’s term “empathy” describes it either. I had imagined the long process of reporting as an extended conversation with her subjects, but LeBlanc told me that’s not it, either.

Whatever “it” is, it takes time. “I’ve never understood what you get from a conversation anyway,” she said.¹ “It’s not the time to think about the conversation, it’s the time to think about the details and images that strike me. They can often not make sense immediately.”

For her, the value of immersion reporting, as compared to standard celebrity interviews, extends beyond the notes taken or the conversations. LeBlanc said:

I think seeing subjects in their environment again and again and again contributes to confidence in my perceptions, which probably comes out in the kind of details I select. It’s not necessarily that if you spend two hours with someone that you don’t have a lot of great detail. But if you spend twenty-

¹ All quotations from LeBlanc come from personal interviews starting in 1994, and from email correspondence with the author.

five hours with them there's something about the details you choose that have a granular quality. They're like the difference between that cheap mustard on the boardwalk and that nice French mustard. That part is instinctive, but I think it has something to do with confidence.

I used to think it was just having more details to choose from, and I'm not saying that doesn't help. But I think it's a measure of feeling as though you know them in their situation that makes it easier to be selective in a way that reveals them.

The writer's connection also includes the time spent away from subjects with the option of coming back. In those breaks during a long immersion, visual details that can symbolize larger qualities sometimes start to make sense.

In 2004, LeBlanc published an article in *The New Yorker* about young comedians in New York struggling to get time on stage in front of an audience. They "bark" tickets to the comedy club on the street, act as janitors in the club, and hope for a break. LeBlanc explained a moment of connection with comic Greg Barris that gave her the key detail in that article. "There's one scene toward the end where Greg Barris is in Times Square and it's snowing," she said. Explaining that moment, she added:

He slides in the snow and then he gets back into character and starts barking, "Hey lady! Free comedy." He starts to do his thing again. It's a moment where I've been with that guy for a real long time and I saw how hard it was. I saw how degrading it was to clear the empty bottles when he was sent to the basement of the club. How difficult it was to get on stage and he was living with his grandmother. It was a little moment of

magic. Pretty clichéd magic—Times Square in New York—but revealing of the magic the city held for him and why he was even there. I thought of him sliding in the snow probably for two days after it happened. I thought, “Am I noticing him sliding in the snow because I used to love that as a kid? Am I noticing it because it was such a relief to have a little bit of fun because he’s such a depressive?” I keep it in my head a lot. My ears are up for more moments with him that echo whatever that thing was. It’s a little moment that, after I noticed it and got to think about it, I became more alert to other moments like it. That’s what I mean about picking detail.

Sometimes the connection with her subject creates an emotional responsiveness to cues, usually something visual in LeBlanc’s case. Her connection seems remarkably close to the connections of friendship that standard reporters avoid forming. Details that are important in standard journalism—ages, names, features of how an apartment is decorated—never naturally settle on LeBlanc’s attention. She makes notes about them, of course. But she knows a lot more about a person’s cares, vulnerabilities, and feelings about other people from moment to moment.

Such connectedness grows from immersion and from a willingness to enter into emotional intimacies with subjects. Like voice, immersion reporting, accuracy, access, and complicated structures, this connectedness that permits the writer to examine her own emotional perspective seems a characteristic of contemporary literary journalism.