

The Transcriptionist

A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In August 2001, after much restless wandering, I found a job transcribing copy for reporters at the *New York Times*. I would like to look back through my journals and make sense of those days, but in my spiral-bound notebook from that period, the pages after the entry for September 10 are blank. Those were not days of writing. They were not days of fiction.

My memories of that fall are spotty. Mostly, I remember walking the sixty-nine blocks from the *Times* building in midtown to my sublet near Columbia University. It was a surreal time when New Yorkers smiled gently at one another as we passed on the street. The job was so strange, and in those weeks and months so numbing, that I had to walk it off. For a while after the September 11 attacks, I spent the first part of my shift in classifieds, often taking death notices for people who had died in the towers.

I cannot remember how we verified the deaths for the

September 11 notices, but I do remember those dreadful calls of grief. “I’m sorry for your loss,” we would say before hanging up and then immediately taking the next obituary call, or sometimes, startlingly, a call about an apartment for sale. In the middle of these death calls a man phoned one evening close to deadline. He wanted to dictate an obituary for his son, who had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. The body had not been recovered, and there was no funeral home to call for verification, so we couldn’t run the notice. The man was distraught. And finally, all he could think to say was, “But I’m a subscriber.”

The weeks passed. The *Times* was still on West Forty-Third Street then, but even in that early twentieth-century building that housed printing presses in the basement, the transcription room was like entering another era. There were televisions with VCRs for recording press conferences or political debates that we transcribed for distribution in the newsroom. There were three recording telephones hooked to Dictaphone machines so we could record and transcribe calls from reporters. They might call from anywhere and for any reason. A foreign reporter might call after she lost Internet access. A local reporter with carpal tunnel might call in to save her wrists. Often, magazine or investigative writers would drop off tapes of long interviews that were later folded into stories or profiles. There were four transcriptionists who worked

in shifts, and it seemed our workload was always either too much or not enough. During slow periods, one of my colleagues liked to say, “We’re racehorses. They pay us to be ready.” A metaphor that made me uncomfortable, especially when my body began to resist the work. I physically recoiled at the daily process of hooking myself to a machine. I would automatically turn my head away as I slipped on the headset, like a horse resisting the bit.

It is still difficult to explain how ravaging I eventually found that job, taking in people’s personal tragedies day after day. And the unreality of it, going from a call about a bombing in Kabul to a dance review by Anna Kisselgoff, who always spelled B-a-l-a-n-c-h-i-n-e, every single time. In part it was the passivity of witnessing tragedy, witnessing it with my ears, and serving only as a conduit, what Gay Talese called the reporters’ “midwife,” passing the news through my body and sending it to be processed into tidy column inches.

My time as an amanuensis ticked by, and I was aware that I was witnessing the end of something: at an immediate level, the end of my department (the transcription room closed in 2007, a few years after I left) and, at a larger level, the decline of newspapers and the turbulent transition to a Web-based news world.

I wasn’t able to write about it for a long time. And the way it came out was in fits and fragments, the real meeting the unreal in my notebook, until suddenly a woman

named Lena appeared on the page. To my surprise, she was in a bar with a Vietnam vet named Ernest, discussing Bruno Schulz and how to revive houseflies with sugar. Ernest and Bruno did not make it into the novel, but Lena would not go away. *The Transcriptionist* is her story.

I don't want to suggest that this is a novel about September 11, whatever that would mean, though it is a novel that couldn't have been written before it. Nor is it a novel about the *New York Times*. It is about one lowly worker questioning the role of the newspaper as an institution, and about how newspapers are facing the challenges and the new reality of the time we're living in. If we tell ourselves stories about ourselves in order to know who we are, then for more than a century newspapers have been the backbone of a collective sense of community. In this new world of virtual living, what will bind us together?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. During the course of *The Transcriptionist*, Lena, the title character, changes in many ways. What do you see as the most significant change she undergoes, and what kind of person do you think she will be two years after the story ends?
2. In light of Lena's conflicted relationship with the news—with its significance and yet its sometimes messy ethics—how do you view the relationship between the press and democracy? Do we need a traditional press to have an informed public?
3. Is Katheryn Keel, the ambitious but ethically compromised reporter, a good journalist? Are her actions justified—even in part? Why?
4. Lena and Katheryn both make decisions based on their ideas of the best ways to search for truth. Are their actions comparable?

5. The fictional newspaper, the *Record*, serves as a stand-in for newspapers and the press in general. Given the recent developments in technology and the shift in how news is transmitted—including the fact that the job of transcriptionist no longer exists—do you think newspapers will survive? Does it matter? Where will the next generations get their information?

6. The author works for a newspaper. If all novelists write, to some degree at least, from life experiences, do you think anything is or should be off-limits for a fiction writer?

7. A lion and a pigeon play big parts in the novel. What do you view as the function of the animals in the story?

8. In what ways does Lena's background as a minister's daughter and a literature graduate student affect her life and her relationship to language? Do you believe, as one critic states, that the novel "asks whether, in our flooded information age, language can continue to have meaning"? If so, what do you think is the answer?

9. How does Lena's professional life shape the way she thinks about the world around her, and about herself? Why do you believe she chose such lonely work and has endured it for so long?

10. Do you think the surreal quality of life for Lena at the *Record* is a reflection of that environment, or is it an extension of her mental state? Do you believe that an institution such as that newspaper would actually issue gas masks to all its employees, or do you think the author invented this in order to make the place feel more alien?

11. We find out at the end of the novel that Lena's friend Kov is not who he seems. Were you surprised about his true identity, or did you have suspicions?

12. Lena's obsession with the story of the woman who committed suicide led her to violate certain long-standing codes in the newspaper business. Do you feel her actions deserved punishment, or was she innocently trying to help solve a mystery?

13. Recent studies have suggested that following constant news coverage of frightening, emotionally wrenching stories can have negative effects. Do you curb your intake of news because of this? What's the solution, if you believe there is one?

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