

Renata Adler On Fearlessness And Becoming A Late-In-Life Cultural Icon

 buzzfeed.com/ariannarebolini/renata-adler-there-was-no-fearlessness

Arianna Rebolini

August 17, 2015



Ron Galella / WireImage

*Earlier this year, journalist and novelist Renata Adler stopped by BuzzFeed's [New York](#) office to talk about her recently released nonfiction collection *After the Tall Timber*. Here's what she had to say about modern criticism, what it was **really** like to write in the 1960s, and how it's felt to become a late-in-life cultural icon.*

On rough beginnings:

RA: There was never a sort of star quality to any of this. It looks as though there might have been, because of these Avedon photos [on the book cover], but it wasn't like that. I was always on the verge of being fired at the *Times*. Here's what happened: Arthur Gelb said to me, "Look, there's a six-week trial period. You understand that, and you're all right if it doesn't work?" And the day before the six-week trial period expired, a friend of mine who was really very well-placed said, "You better write your letter of resignation because you've been fired."

So I was writing it. It seemed to be normal but somewhat scary — but all of it seemed scary then! — and then Arthur Gelb came and said, "You've got it." I thought at the time, and I think now, that exactly what happened was I had in fact been fired by the people at the very top

but then Arthur Gelb and A.M. Rosenthal said, "You better keep her." So this idea of my past is imaginary. There was none of this smooth course that people imagine, and I wasn't a very prolific writer, either, which is part of why I moved to the *Times*. I was an outsider.

On working through fear:

RA: There was no fearlessness. I was terrified the whole time, and was a rather shy person besides. It might not seem it — here I am babbling the whole time — but I was a very shy person and I had a tremor on top of it. I couldn't write my name sometimes! So no, I was never fearless. In fact, if you fear almost every human contact, and also loss of human contact, then in a way you can't tell the difference between what's trouble and what's not, because everything's trouble. Supposing you spill something on somebody, or something. All those shy things, those worries one has. It's all a problem. But you can keep going! The thing is not to stop.

On covering the civil rights marches:

Did you get the sense while you were down there that you were really watching history unfold?

RA: No, I didn't think of it that way, but I thought, *These are the best people I ever met, doing the best work I ever saw*. It's unbelievable how good it was. And they were winning! It began to seem that they were winning, and I thought, *This is the best thing that's ever happened*.

It's crazy, because the reader almost forgets that you're even there. You talk about that — the importance of removing the personal from journalism. It's this amazing storytelling ability.

RA: Oh, but you know, it wasn't. I had just been hired at *The New Yorker*, and I said, "Could I go south?" And Mr. [William] Shawn said OK. You're all so young, but in those days women wore high heels, and gloves, and it got cold because it was March. So I arrived there in the South in my winter coat and my mother's high heels, and these gloves, like a lunatic, or a very, very left-wing Northerner, right? What did they call it? "Outside agitator." But I couldn't do reported pieces — I still can't, pretty much — unless the structure's right out there. And nothing is easier in terms of structure than a march, because it starts, and then the next thing happens, and the next thing happens, and the next thing happens, and then it's over.

On knowing when a project is complete:

In a book like *Speedboat*, where there is this kind of unconventional plot, how do you know that it's finished? That it's in the right order. It's all of these little vignettes — when do you know the picture is complete?

RA: That's a very good question, because I don't always know. But I never did in nonfiction, either. Often I had no idea I was going on long after the piece had ended, until the editor said, "Look, it ends here." With *The New Yorker*, one thing that happened — and it must happen here, too — is when the deadline happens, that's when it's over. Otherwise, you can keep changing everything, and it becomes like an action painting — which is not good. You don't want that.

RENATA ADLER

visits BUZZFEED

“If you have to write three times a week, the only way to get rid of the embarrassment is to try the next piece, and hope it will be better and erase the last piece.”

“That's the main thing, isn't it? Just to keep doing it.”

“There was no fearlessness. I was terrified the whole time.”

“Opinion is no nearer fiction than reporting is.”

“There was never a sort of star quality to any of this.”



D.Meth

Dan Meth / BuzzFeed

On accountability:

RA: It's a very perilous thing to write. People can attack you all the time, and you may be right, and you may not be right, and even if you're not right then, you just keep going ahead. You try to be right the next time.

On opinion writing:

RA: This kind of writing seems to blend into the role of the critic, but it really isn't. It's just a writer, writing what is basically nonfiction. Opinion is no nearer fiction than reporting is. But one doesn't want to express one's opinion about everything, not even about everything about which one feels strongly. Because you can't! So you get fake criticism. You get very opinionated people saying very nasty things in print, and then people say, "Have you seen what this one did to this one?" And that — "what this one did to this one" — is not what one wants to be hearing.

On looking forward:

RA: The embarrassing part about writing something, and having it published, is the part right after when you're thinking, *Oh my god, what are people going to think?* If you're having one piece every three years, that's it, it's done. But if you have to write three times a week, the only way to get rid of the embarrassment is to try the next piece, and hope it will be better, and erase the last piece. Which is probably what you want. You want to just keep going forward. Is that what happens with you?

I try not to read back too much on things I've written. It can become something like, "How did I ever think this was good?"

RA: You know, that's the Edmund Wilson thing. He used to get up at three in the morning and he'd read old pieces and sometimes he would think, *This is so terrible, it's the most embarrassing thing, how can I deal with the world ever again, having written that?* And then later he'd think, *God, you know, I've lost it!* And that's what it's like. It's just terrible. It's good not to look back.

On punching up:

RA: There's no point, really, in going after something or someone and saying no, absolutely not, unless that thing is very powerful. And you've got to be awfully careful about whether it's truly a powerful villain, because people are more fragile than one thinks. Odd to say after the Pauline Kael piece, but I only wrote the one, and she certainly more than survived. Cultivate the powerful and go for it. I don't regret [the Pauline Kael piece] and I never have, but it was not good for business. Probably it's rarely good for business, unless you're running the show.

On perseverance:

RA: This [return into the literary world] is lucky. It could've gone the other way — could still go the other way. It's taught me a lot. You can talk yourself into a really miserable state, thinking, *Oh, poor me, it's over, it wasn't so much anyway, there are no books in print*. You can certainly provide evidence for this miserable state. And then suddenly you think, *You know, it's not so bad, maybe I should do something, write something*. That's the main thing, isn't it? Just to keep doing it.



RENATA ADLER
AFTER THE TALL TIMBER COLLECTED NONFICTION

New York Review Books