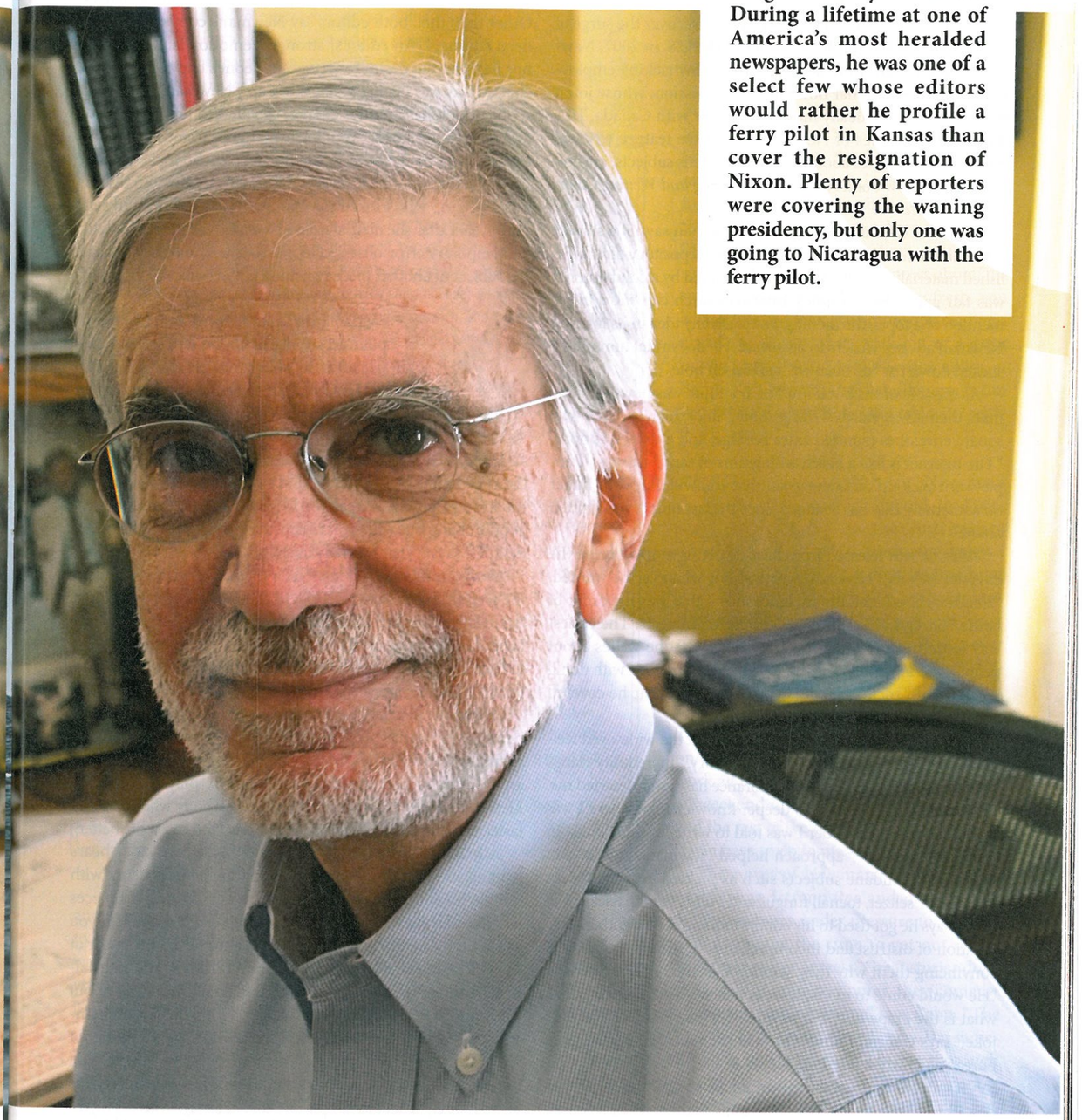
Clanging the bell

BY TYLER J. KELLEY

If it's news to you and interesting to a dentist in Akron, Barry Newman says it's a story.

Dinah Glasier

IT IS LIKELY that no other newspaperman in history has avoided as much news for as long as Barry Newman. During a lifetime at one of America's most heralded newspapers, he was one of a select few whose editors would rather he profile a ferry pilot in Kansas than cover the resignation of Nixon. Plenty of reporters were covering the waning presidency, but only one was going to Nicaragua with the ferry pilot.



Lying on the sofa in his well-appointed Brooklyn apartment, the veteran journalist pretended to be a therapist's patient as he told the story of 43 years at the *Wall Street Journal* and more than 400 front-page features.

When reporters rushed to cover the surge of immigration at the southern border of the U.S. in 2007, Newman headed north to write about the bushwhacking employees of the International Boundary Commission, whose job it was to locate (and ideally mow) the border with Canada. This and other examples of Newman's narrative feature writing, along with anecdotes about how he found his subjects, are collected in his new book *News to Me: Finding and Writing Colorful Feature Stories*.

In the old days of newspapering, Newman says, if a subject wasn't in the *Journal*'s morgue, the official repository of its published material, or hadn't been loudly covered by a competitor, it was fair game. Now a quick Internet search can show every mention of a topic, threatening to squash any idea in its infancy. Newman advises writers to persevere. He doesn't let himself get sucked down the "it's been written" rabbit hole.

As the title of his book implies, if a topic was news to Newman, then it was worth writing about. Once, he wondered why square envelopes required extra postage, and a story was born. "The Internet is like a beach with grains of sand," he says. "People won't pick up the same grain that you will. Put your finger on something that has changed since the last time it was written about."

After he was released from beat reporting at the *Journal* (he covered metals), Newman wrote about whatever he wanted. "Neighborhood, childhood, ignorance – that was the order of battle," he says, describing his search for subjects. The easiest way to define a Newman story is to say that he writes about people who are not famous and are usually obsessed with doing small things, such as selling baby bananas, a topic he covered after retiring in 2013.

In the book, the chapter "Huh?" is about the wide-eyed feeling of surprise that makes for a good story. "Incredulity clangs the story bells," he writes. "My ignorance has never deserted me. Innocently abroad, I had no deeper knowledge of where I was than the typical subscriber I was told to write for: the dentist in Akron." The "huh?" approach helped Newman find news in seemingly mundane subjects such as pickled herring, trucks that deliver seltzer, toenail fungus and Polish French fries.

He says he got used to his editors looking at him with a combination of distrust and incomprehension. But he was good at convincing them why they should be as interested as he was. "He would come to me with ideas that were preposterous, like what is the grape nut? For anyone else it would be a one-line joke," says Gabriel Kahn, who was the *Journal*'s Los Angeles bureau chief when he edited Newman.

"It's a selling process," Newman says, advising writers to describe characters and scenes to convey their enthusiasm for an idea. Newman is also very particular about his copy. He welcomes questions from editors, but he doesn't want someone else's words in his piece.

"Sometimes it was a little too fancy and densely packed for the dentist," says Ken Wells, Newman's former editor at the *Journal*'s Page One. He would ask Newman to unpack his sentences. Other than that, both editors say Newman's copy didn't really need editing. "[An editor's] strongest emotion is neither love nor hate but the desire to change someone's copy," says Wells, "but no way was I going to line edit Barry Newman."

The book has another chapter devoted to tapping friends and relatives for ideas. "You don't want your friends to feel like they're being used, but those are the people who make up your perception of the world," he says. Newman's mother, Emily, was a "script girl," who looked for "continuity errors" on film sets. Forty years after she died, she gave Newman the idea to look for contemporary error-obsessed movie watchers, and they became the subject of another piece reprinted in the book, "Continuity."

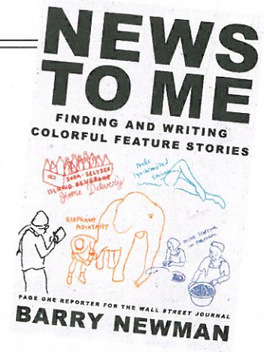
Newman grew up in Queens and majored in political science at Union College in Schenectady. He went to law school for a year, but dropped out to work as a copy boy for *The New York Times*. From there, he went to the *Journal*. A few years later, he was assigned to report overseas, where he lived for 21 years. He didn't go to journalism school, and he wants his book to impart the kind of practical, real-world education he received. "It's good to hang out with other reporters, to figure out how they do it," he says. "That was my education."

Newman thinks of himself as a magazine writer who uses the techniques of fiction. "I try to describe places, get people talking to each other, cut from scene to scene and explain what's happening in omniscient asides," he writes. The trick was always to compress his idea into a few-thousand-words newspaper column. "It became a game, a kind of haiku," he says.

He spent decades perfecting his haiku style – not really newspaper writing and not really long-form – sometimes spending a month on a single story. "I can write shorter than anybody who can write faster," he says, playing off A. J. Liebling's adage, "I can write better than anybody who can write faster, and I can write faster than anybody who can write better."

A haiku is, of course, poetry. And a Newman story bears reading and rereading in the same way. Each line is dense with double meanings, puns and information. "Editing his pieces was like playing Jenga – the whole thing would crumble if you started moving things around," says Kahn, now a professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "You really had to go in with a scalpel." The story about finding the northern border began: "Kyle Hipsley, a chain-smoking 52-year-old Iowan, has spent 20 summers looking for America. More often than not, he has trouble finding it." Not one word is wasted. But unlike some poetry, Newman's style is also infinitely readable, simple and direct, always with his mythical Akron dentist, in mind.

An excerpt from *News to Me: Finding and Writing Colorful Feature Stories*



An outline's mission is to keep readers reading. The formula's requisite block of components, packed in after the lede, conspires to stop them. When do the preliminaries end? When does the storytelling begin? My ideal is to crush up the block and sprinkle it through the story like a trail of Grape-Nuts in the forest, giving readers reason to read on. Stories all have story lines. Chronologies move along time lines, over hours or years, flashing forward or back. Conflicts and case studies, the grist of newspaper features, progress from argument to argument, from point to point. After searching fruitlessly for S. Larson, the mysterious signee of every Citibank customer letter, the outline of the story I wrote was the timeline of my frustrated reporting. Occasionally, I begin at the beginning. My Paris-Moscow train ride started in Paris and ended in Moscow. But the cross-channel swim I followed started at the end, as the swimmer caught sight of a French beach. The flight I took to Managua from Cleveland in a light plane started in the middle, with Wayne Sperling, the pilot, trying to find the airport in Brownsville, Texas, at sundown.

Old Hopalong Cassidy episodes are my organizational influence, though the outlines I like have also been called "novelistic." Hoppy and the novelists handle transitions beautifully, whether it's the cliffhanger before a commercial break, or the point where a novel's narrator interrupts to fill in a character's childhood traumas.

Outlines take shape as a string of scenes – witnessed moments when something happens. As a scene closes, the narrator (me) steps in to supply perspective. In the Malaysian camp where the rats kept me awake, each scene in my story described the questioning of a different refugee family. Each family's fate was sealed by a different regulation. After each scene, I stepped in with that regulation's dry details. To break up a dense story on a German company's reluctance to market its abortion pill, I dropped in three scenes of three women in the lounge of an Edinburgh infirmary, waiting for the pill to work. It wasn't comic relief, but readers saw and heard real people instead of getting a bunch of statistics, and quotes from talking heads.

Before pulling away from the curb, drivers usually know where they're going. Reporters who sit down to type ought to know where their stories will end. But so much rests on grabbing attention with a lede and nailing it with a nut graf that what remains is often left to drift. A good story is strong all the way through. A good outline is its road map – from lede to kicker.

Newman rewrites as he goes, crafting the same sentence over and over to make it shorter and more efficient. "I try very hard to avoid unnecessary repetition, to clear out and simplify, in a way that eliminates or minimizes adjectives and adverbs, to be vivid without being trite," he says. "If I can write short, I think it's a gift to the reader."

Newman acknowledges that it might not be possible to take his path these days. Working at one paper for 43 years? Writing a dozen stories a year, having a Page One spot that's yours for the taking, plus 2 million readers, a salary and all expenses paid? In 2015, that sounds like fiction.

"I lived in a golden age of newspapering, which doesn't exist anymore, and it might not come back," Newman says. In his heyday, he could tell his editors there was a story on a remote Pacific island and be told, "Fly to Tonga, spend 11 days there and write two fluffy little stories," Newman says. Today, that's inconceivable for most writers.

But he insists it's still realistic for a writer to follow his or her lead (or lede) in the current journalistic climate. "There are so many outlets that are hungry for this sort of stuff," he says. The writers of straight news are the ones in trouble, he maintains, because that side of the profession has been taken over by the Internet. "So much of what gets attention is stuff that everyone already knows about," he says. If you can offer something fresh, you have an outlet. "People no more quit reading a greatly told story than walk out of a great movie," says Wells, now a senior editor at Bloomberg News. "The real dilemma is can you get paid for it. We're still trying to settle that question."

When Newman started in 1966, the journalism industry was in flux, as it is now. TV news was putting local papers out of business, but Newman was unfazed. "I just did it. It never crossed my mind that the industry was falling apart. I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking: This is exciting, and I want to do it. The only way to get these stories done, the only way that I did it at the beginning, is to work all the time – work 15 hours a day and all weekend on the stories you really want, and the rest of the time, do what whatever it is you have to do to make a living," he says.

The point of Newman's book is to get reporters off the phone and computer and out into the world. "Far too many people are under pressure to produce too much, and they can't take the time to get out of the office," he says. His former editor agrees: "Great stories don't come by you sitting down at your computer, they come by you reporting and reporting and reporting," says Kahn. "The idea that we can find the answers on Google breeds a sameness to everything." Kahn and Wells both say that thorough reporting is the best way for a novice journalist to stand out.

If Newman has perfected the art of finding colorful subjects,

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it may be because he is one himself. In his airy apartment high above Brooklyn's Prospect Park, a wall is filled with identical National 1 Subject, Narrow Ruled, Easy-Eye Paper, 80-sheet notebooks – 737 of them – with notes written exclusively with BIC Cristal Easy Glide Bold Tip 1.6mm pens (pencils if it's below freezing). The fastidious byproduct of a lifetime of reporting.

Below the notebooks is what Newman calls "the shelf of my gods": E. B. White, A. J. Liebling, Joseph Mitchell, John McPhee, Gay Talese, Maeve Brennan, James Thurber. "Before I start writing, I always take down a book by E. B. White, and I read a few paragraphs to get in the mood," he says. White has "the sound, the attitude that I aspire to."

An editor once wrote that Newman writes about middle-aged men seeking symbols of dignity. Newman agrees: "Unconsciously, all my life, that's what I've been doing. That's where I make my connection with obsessives who are doing something that no one else thinks is interesting, but who are totally devoted to it." People like the blacksmith who believes you should cut your grass with a scythe, and the man who owns Gongs Unlimited. His subjects, he says, are "people who are passionate about small things that give themselves a sense of self worth, purpose and dignity, even though the rest of the world doesn't particularly care about them."

Newman also likes reading the *Paris Review*'s "Writers at Work" series because it helps him realize many writers have self-doubt.

Humility has allowed him to connect with his subjects. "I feel good about feeling sympathy for subjects who are not famous but have a life they are proud of – even the very poorest people on earth," he says, and he refers to a man in Java who sold cigarettes out of a pushcart. "When I was in Asia, I stopped feeling sorry for people, I stopped condescending and I stopped my earnestness. I stopped those violins from playing. People think that's very callous, but I think it shows more respect for every individual."

To gain subjects' trust, he says, show great interest in what they are doing and share their enthusiasm. The key is to establish an equal relationship.

News is the writer's to make, he says. Don't follow the pack or the news cycle. "To me, what's new are the kind of stories that nobody else is doing, that come from your own imagination or your own perception," he says. *News to Me* leaves the reader feeling as if great stories are everywhere if only one really looks.

Now that he's retired, Newman is thinking about writing fiction. "The structure of a short story is not much different from the structure of a short nonfiction story," he says.

In the introduction to an earlier book, *East of the Equator*, a collection of his articles from Asia, Newman wrote about how newspapers want their writers to have authority, a tone of omniscience. He disagrees. "Deep down I prefer to leave things hanging," he wrote. "In the real world, things are left hanging all the time." W

Tyler J. Kelley is a freelance journalist based in New York City. His work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*.

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