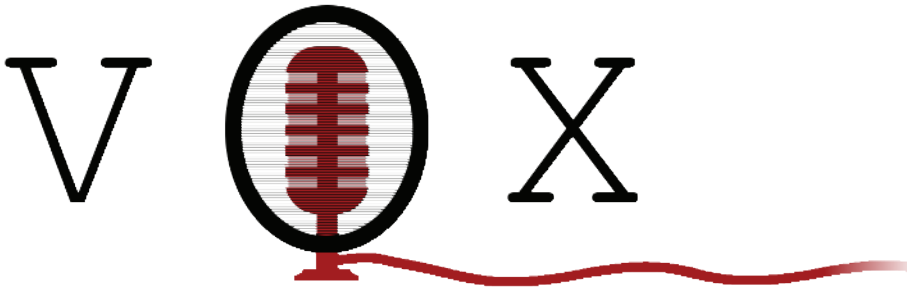

Why I Write

Karl Whitney

Where does the urge to write come from? Why write about one thing and not another? The subject I choose to pursue can dictate what I spend weeks, months and even years working on. Often my interest is driven by an instinct that there's something there to be told. An obscure desire drives me onwards and, given time and enough thought and research, something clicks, and the subject becomes intensely narratable, a hitherto arcane world made suddenly compelling to me, and, I hope, to the reader too.

But what clicks, and why? Often it's because, over the course of the research and writing process, you discover a personal angle that becomes the driving force for the piece, even if it's ultimately not the central focus. You need to find something of yourself in a subject that might initially seem distant from your interests.

This happened when I found out about the Gateshead golf course that went on fire. I'm a writer of nonfiction. I had been living in north-east England for a couple of years when I began looking around for something to write about. I had just published my first book, about my home city of Dublin, which inevitably involved not just historical and journalistic excursions but a significant element of autobiography.

Of the north-east I knew little, aside from its shipbuilding and coalmining history. I had little personal experience of the place on which I could draw.

One day, while idly browsing newspapers for something of interest, I found a story that drew my attention: the edge of a golf course's fairway on the bank of the River Tyne had caught fire, and the earth beneath it was smouldering. Coal spoils from a disused mine buried beneath the grass had somehow caught fire, and efforts to stop the burn had come to nothing. I gathered piles of material, finding out about underground fires elsewhere and interviewing an expert about the phenomenon. I wondered how I would organise the material, what would animate it, give it life so that it stood up and walked around, metaphorically speaking.

I took a train to the golf course to have a look. I reached the section of the course where the fire had taken hold — it was next to a public path, fenced off from the rest of the fairway. The course was still in use: golfers teed off nearby. I climbed over the low fence onto the section of barren, grassless ground. Thin plumes of smoke billowed from narrow cracks in the baked earth. I crouched down, and placed my hand on the ground: it was hot to the touch. I inhaled, and the smoke bore the sharp bitumen stench of a coal fire.

Since moving to the UK, fragments of memories of Ireland would occasionally grip me: scenes of childhood or adolescence for the most part, triggered by nostalgia or melancholy. As I crouched on the baked earth and inhaled the billowing smoke I was transported back to sitting in front of the open fire in the front room of my grandmother's house. I could picture the scene clearly — the wooden panelling on the sitting-room walls, the newspaper held across the fireplace to momentarily stop the draught from the chimney while lighting the coals. I hadn't thought about it in many years. Suddenly what I believed to be an exotic and unsettling story that was far from my own general experience contained a personal element that I hadn't previously considered.

It might seem a relatively small thing, but it reinforced for me the importance of being open to the subjective — the stream of consciousness that you might otherwise neglect when standing somewhere scribbling

observations in a reporter's notebook. That sometimes the reason you write something, why you might take on a topic far from your comfort zone, will be unknown to you until you push yourself to pay closer attention to it. Increasingly, when I write about a subject, I try to recognise even the briefest moment of connection or recognition that can make the whole thing come alive — a ghost in the machine, or a spark to be kindled. I'm now certain that one of the main reasons I write is to seek out such moments.