



## The Writer as Outsider

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I'VE ALWAYS COUNTED MYSELF as lucky, phenomenally so, to have travelled a good deal in the course of my working life. Fifteen-plus years in documentaries, followed by the research for my first three books, has taken me all over the world, from the rebel-held jungles of Colombia to the marbled piazzas of Rome, from the war-scarred Balkans to shiny, noisy, high-rise Hong Kong.

More immersive by far than any holiday I've ever taken, the real privilege of these journeys lay in the fact that my sole objective was to observe and absorb. To look carefully, that was my job, with a necessary degree of journalistic dispassion of course, both at the broad canvas and the fine detail, to listen intently to the extraordinary human stories particular to that place and time.

In documentaries, of course, the limits of your storytelling are largely set by where you point the camera. Early on, I had a tough boss who told me, bluntly, 'If you haven't shot it, Polly, you haven't got it.' And she was right. I learned how to parcel up discrete portions of what I saw and heard into filmed sequences, visual units of story. These would swirl around my head and populate my dreams in some cheap hotel in god-knows-where with a disco downstairs and a humming minibar in the corner.

How liberating it then was, some years later, to undertake the research trips for my books. No such constraints on what you have and haven't harvested for your story. The whole experience, every waking minute, was



up for grabs, whether this was the repatriation of a dead soldier through the mourning streets of a grey English town, or the row of skittish day-trippers peering down into the smoking crater of Vesuvius. As long as I scribbled notes of what I saw and heard and felt, and boy o boy did I scribble notes, then it was mine for the taking, every exotic, intoxicating moment of it.

And this was a significant part of the allure: that feeling of being wide awake, all sense and intellect and emotion atingle with the novelty of it, the otherness. Observation was, to my mind, or certainly in my experience, pretty much synonymous with standing on the outside looking in.

However, my latest book, my fourth, is set in the quiet, wooded valley where I've lived for the last decade. This time, the landscape and the community I've observed are my own. Many of the people in the book are my neighbours. I drive my kids to school along these lanes. If I walk to the pub to meet friends for Sunday lunch, it's through these woods. The place I've spent the last eighteen months writing about is right outside the window as I record this. It's my home.

And this process of turning a documentary eye on my own backyard has been revelatory. I've realised that you don't have to get on a plane to open your eyes and your ears. Sure, that can be a shortcut to an intense observational state, but you can do it anywhere. The magic on your doorstep is no less magic for being familiar, the stories no less rich. There's an old adage bandied around to rookie writers that you should write what you know. I don't know about 'should', but I've certainly discovered that paying attention over and over and over again, as the days pass and the seasons change, well, that yields something profound and fresh and true.