

What the journalist saw

Bringing to life tales of tragedy, heroes, history

By Glenn C. Altschuler | February 28, 2010

A lifelong newspaperman, Elliott Maraniss loved stories with characters and drama. Even if they weren't elegiac or especially elegant. He lived by the motto that in the real world, things could be worse. But in baseball - and Elliott always turned to the sports section before the front page - he seemed to sense that no matter how good things were right now, disaster was right around the corner.

Like father, like son. In "Into the Story," a collection of his best work that is often elegant and elegiac, David Maraniss, associate editor at The Washington Post and the biographer of Bill Clinton, Vince Lombardi, and Roberto Clemente, devotes himself to the printed word, "the sifting of fact and truth from the chaff of unprocessed information," and the need we all have to express ourselves by telling stories. He has a gift for finding the small details of our daily routine that can "suddenly take on deep visual and metaphorical meaning" - and remind us that life is ordinary until it isn't.

Acknowledging that evil exists in the world, Maraniss isn't all that interested in fixing blame. He's fascinated by the resourcefulness and resilience of people forced to face tragedy and death. On Sept. 11, 2001, Maraniss writes, Steve Miller got off the subway, stopped at the deli for an ice coffee and a scone, made a note to himself to buy veggies for dinner, and ascended to the 78th floor of the World Trade Center. Less than an hour later, he filed down the stairs with other employees, "three across, without speaking." Miller walked back to Brooklyn, hugged his wife, and called his boss to ask about his colleague, Hope Romano. Yes, he learned, "Hope was alive."

Maraniss also captures the inexplicable power of randomness over human existence. We can wonder, but never know, he indicates, why Seung Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech mass murderer, chose Norris Hall for his rampage. Or marvel that Guillermo Colman survived because Partahi Lumbantoruan, a fellow graduate student in a class in advanced hydrology, fell on top of him.

Even more poignantly, Maraniss relives the moment when he learned that his sister had died while driving her subcompact on a straightaway stretch of a two-lane highway, near the town of Varick, N.Y., that was 90 percent clear, but slippery in spots. Remembering that a few months earlier, while sitting in Shea Stadium, he had caught a foul ball hit by Atlanta Braves slugger Andruw Jones, he asks, knowing that it won't change a thing, why the ball found him and the black ice found Wendy.

In his stories about sports heroes, Maraniss traces the arc of loss and recovery as well. As Roberto Clemente, the great outfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, prepared to deliver supplies to earthquake-ravaged Managua, Nicaragua, he didn't know that his pilot was in danger of losing his commercial license or that the old DC-7 they were flying, stuffed with boxes of food, was more than 4,000 pounds over its authorized load. A long, bleak week after the crash, the Coast Guard found one sock among the wreckage, and Vera, Roberto's wife, knew it was his. "One sock," Maraniss writes, "that's all, the rest to sharks and gods."

He chooses to end his essay on Muhammad Ali, however, not with the former heavyweight champion enfeebled by Parkinson's disease, but intellectually alive, doing magic tricks, understanding that life is a matter of perception and deception, teaching and preaching through a "new poetry, slower, no rhymes, streams of consciousness, deeper meaning." Still the greatest, Ali stares at an old black and white image of himself hanging in a barn, gloved hands raised in triumph. He leaves the barn door open, Maraniss notes, "a ray of light filtering in."

Oddly, Maraniss's profiles of politicians are the least satisfying essays here. He points out, persuasively, that "Hope takes you nowhere in understanding Bill Clinton." But his effort to anoint Hot Springs, Ark., where Clinton lived from age 5 to 17, falls a bit flat. Once the home of Lucky Luciano, Meyer Lansky, and the Capone brothers, the town, we can guess, probably didn't make Clinton into a "divided soul: part earnest preacher, part fast-talking gambler, with an urge to reform, yet also to accommodate."

More intriguing is Maraniss's claim that the seminal influence on Barack Obama was his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham. "The ways he wanted to be like her and how he reacted against her," he suggests, had a permanent impact on Obama.

At times, her eagerness to find the best in people struck him as naïve and strengthened his resolve to be a realist. As he matured, he realized that naïveté can lead to action - and realism to paralysis. Maraniss hasn't yet worked it all out. But, if the past is prologue, he probably will, in the multigenerational biography of the Obama family at which he's now hard at work.

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