

"Ellies 2008: Hey, How'd You Write An Award-Worthy Feature, Jeanne Marie Laskas?"

This Ellie-nominated writer took immersion journalism literally, descending into coal mines for a lengthy GQ feature

By David S. Hirschman | *mediabistro* | April 28, 2008



In the wake of the Sago, W.Va., mine collapse in January of 2006 (where 13 miners were trapped underground for two days, and only one survived), *GQ* writer Jeanne Marie Laskas saw the opportunity to do a story she'd been thinking about for a long time -- an immersion journalism project where she would actually go down into the coal mines in her home state of Pennsylvania and get an inside view of an industry we all depend on, but which most of us know little, if anything about. While pretty much every mining company she called rejected the idea of letting her go down with their workers (many wouldn't even return her calls), one mine, about two hours from where she lived, agreed to let her come by, day after day, and go deep inside the mines with its workers.

The resulting story, "Underworld," appeared in the May, 2007, issue of the magazine, and recently was nominated for an Ellie for excellence in feature writing. *mediabistro.com* caught up with Laskas recently to go back over the process of researching and writing the story, and to find out what she learned from the process.

This story took you deep into the lives of the people you were writing about. Tell me a little about similar immersion journalism projects you've done in the past.

I've done quite a few. One similar to this was with deer hunters -- which was a world I so feared and couldn't deal with -- and I went off and killed and slaughtered deer and got to know that culture. Another one was this bull-rider I just loved -- this young guy who wanted to be the best bull-rider in the world. and he was not very good and that made it more interesting. I probably wouldn't be interested in the champion bull-rider story; I'm more interested in the guy who is so passionate about this thing even though he can't even keep his seven-second ride.

The three topics you've mentioned are all heavy into issues of masculinity. Coming at it as a woman, is it easier or more difficult to build trust for these types of stories?

Apparently, I'm really drawn to men; I really rarely write stories about women, and it seems to just be men who do very classically masculine activities. I think that in some ways it helps to be a woman doing it because I go in as a mother or a little sister or whatever. It's non-threatening, and it throws it into a sort of psychological place almost automatically, so that people tell me their problems. I think guys can talk easier to women -- these kinds of guys anyway. It's certainly a dynamic that I've noticed.

Looking at some of your stories, it seems like you tend to go to places that test your own fear levels. Is that part of how you come up with ideas?

That fear thing is a recent thing -- I've got a little thrill thing going. I'm not drawn so much by that usually, as much as thinking about, "Where can I find some interesting characters?" The fear thing tends to intensify the experience, but it's not what I go after. And I don't tend to write that much in the first person.

You did in the coal miner story. And a lot of what you were able to expose had to involve explicitly showing that you were down there and what it was like.

That was the first first-person story I'd done in quite a long while, and I just sort of surrendered to it, because the reader has never been in a coal mine -- almost nobody has -- so you've got to attach to somebody going in there for the first time, and to feel that weirdness. You can't attach to any of these other characters going in there for the first time, because they're already so used to it. You want to really feel that visceral thing of what it's like to be down there. That's the first question everyone has about a coal mine: "How the hell can you stand it?"

If you go in with that premise -- "Why would anybody choose to do go down into this scary place every day and do this as a job?" -- doesn't that already put a spin on the questions you ask?

That's really all I asked at first. It was even more explicit than that. I kept saying, "You've got to be kidding me." Absolutely. And I think that's why you stay so long. If I just had that over and over again, it would just be a one- beat story -- that would just be shock value. But if you stay in there long enough -- and, really, four months is not even long enough -- the point of the experiment is to see if it can become normal.

When you were down in the mine, you weren't doing any mining work, so were you just kind of hanging out most of the time? It must be just hours and hours straight of just sitting in a coal mine, no?

Yup. And something I always tell my journalism students is that you have to have a really high capacity to be bored, because there is a lot of just absolutely nothing happening -- or the same thing that happened yesterday happens again and again and again and again. Seeing something 15 times like that teaches you something that you couldn't learn from just seeing it once, so it's a kind of a deepening. Or maybe it's a deepening of the character as you see this kind of rhythm and surrender to it. You can't get that just once; rhythm happens over time. It's all about time.

What was the most difficult aspect of it? And at what point did you get over your fear of going down into the mine?

I actually got over that remarkably quickly. It was true what they told me -- you find out the first time you go down whether you can stand it or not. I was really afraid. I didn't think I was going to be able to do it. Thinking about it was much harder than just doing it. When you're in there, it's just so damn interesting that you forget. You get completely disoriented and you're not thinking that it's scary; only about how foreign it is down there. The bizarreness factor takes over.

I'm not a particularly brave person, but it just distracted me somehow to be interested. And you get hooked in wanting to talk to the people.

I just sketch scenes and I start to look at it and think to myself "What is this adding up to?" And then it starts getting fun.

You described a bit at the end of the piece about how you continued to go down into the mine even though you already had what you needed for the story. Have you had any more revelations about why you felt so drawn to the place and the people?

There is definitely something about it. I still talk to the guys from down there -- we talk on the phone all the time, and I always want to know what's going on, and I always want to know dumb stuff about the airflow or whatever. I just got really in. You become part of this little world, and you know all of the specifics of it and the everydayness of it. It's like a school you once went to... I'm actually very glad that I had that experience of not wanting to leave, because I think that's part of what it is for these guys.

As you were doing the reporting -- going down in the mine every day -- are you also writing in the evenings? Or do you wait until afterwards and then just dump it all?

I never even think about writing when I'm researching. I can't even go there. I'm so not a writer at that moment, and it's just not about words or even images at that point. I'm usually calling my editor and telling him everything that just happened, and having conversations because I want to hear what I'm saying and what I'm noticing -- and what is surprising to him. So we have a lot of conversations like that, and that's good data. I record those conversations with Andy [Ward, GQ's executive editor], because sometimes you can forget what was interesting to you. But I don't start writing until way after the fact. I take pages and pages of notes, but the writing is later.

At what point do you know what the structure is going to be like? Does it develop as you go along?

For me, it grows out of the story, so I never know ahead of time. I know what are going to be scenes, so that's sort of where it starts. I just sketch scenes and I start to look at it and think to myself, "What is this adding up to?" And then it starts getting fun.

When you're looking at your stack of research and listening to the endless tapes -- and you have this intimate experience with the subject -- do you ever wonder how you're going to be able to properly convey the scene?

That is the hell of it. It's horrible. That's just when I take naps constantly. Because it just seems so impossible. That's the whole beginning stage of wrestling down the story. I don't ever believe that I can communicate it. And this may be really bad news, but this kind of feeling does not get easier -- at least for me it hasn't. But while it doesn't may be really bad news, but this kind of feeling does not get easier -- at least for me it hasn't. But while it doesn't get easier -- every one is a terrible fight -- I just trust the process now. In the old days, the fact that it was so hard was depressing, and I wanted to give up, and I didn't believe that it would ever come together.

Laskas' tips for getting the story

1. Character, character, character

It's all about character. I should have teased with more character threads earlier on -- I wish I had. And in my next stories I want to be more mindful of that.

2. Information is boring, so condense, condense, condense.

Find any way you can to condense it. You've got to convey it -- it's got to happen to give the story a foundation -- but get past it as quickly as possible, and get back to character.

David S. Hirschman is the editor of mediabistro.com's Morning Newsfeed.

[This interview has been edited for length and clarity.]