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Literary Journalist: Harlan Ellison

Biographical Information

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 27, 1934, Harlan Jay Ellison grew up as the only child of the only Jewish family in nearby Painesville. He explained how this one fact figured in to his early years in a 1990 interview: “(Other kids) used to beat (the daylight) out of me. Regularly. ... I had no friends. Not just a few friends, or one good friend, or grudging acceptance by other misfits and outcasts. I was alone. All stinking alone, without even an imaginary playmate. (9:1)” Always being smaller than the other kids did not help matters either (Ellison maxed out at five-feet four-inches in height.) He learned a variety of self-defense arts which would come into play even more when he began his immersion journalism.

His father’s ever changing career path, first being convicted of distributing moonshine followed by a stint as a dentist and later as a jewelry salesman, left young Ellison feeling ostracized from his community. He spent his adolescence running away from home and working at odd jobs including as a logger, a tuna fisherman, an actor and even a dynamite-truck driver. (9:1)

Ellison attended Ohio State University briefly (1954-55) but was dismissed after he punched a creative writing professor who said he had no talent. He was then drafted and served in the army for two years (1957-59). He moved to New York to become a full time writer, and decided to go undercover into a kid street gang to gather information for his first novel. The novel that Ellison wrote from these experiences, *Web of the City*, did not sit well with him, so he later wrote a nonfiction account of his time in the gang.

As a writer, one of Ellison’s claims to fame has been his ability to create new stories while sitting in the window of a bookstore for anyone interested to watch the process in action. He has performed this feat around the globe, in Paris, London, New York, Boston, Los Angeles, New Orleans and more. The most amazing part about these sessions is not that it can be done, but that Ellison can work under those pressures and leave with stories that win major literary awards.

He has written for magazines, newspapers, television, motion pictures and just about any other outlet imaginable and has won more awards for his 60+ books and 1,400+ short stories, essays, articles and columns than any other living fantasist. (10:1) Ellison is happily married for the fifth time to a young woman named Susan. His previous four marriages all ended disastrously in divorce, but this one seems to have had a calming influence. (11:1)

Background as an Author

Though he has written crime exposes, television and movie scripts, autobiographical fiction, mysteries, journalism and almost any other literary style imaginable, Ellison's books will undoubtedly be shelved in the science fiction section of bookstores and libraries. He is, undeniably, a science fiction writer, but that hat is only one of many that he has worn throughout his career. Maybe it is because Ellison has won more awards in the field of science fiction than any other author that he is constantly pigeonholed into this single category. He has won seven Hugos, four Bram Stoker Awards, four Writers Guild of America Awards, three Nebulas, two Edgar Allen Poe Awards, two World Fantasy Awards, two Jupiter Awards, and has been nominated for both an Emmy and a Grammy, for his work in fiction alone. He has even been called "one of the greatest living American writers of short stories" by no less a critic than *The Washington Post*. Renowned fantasist Isaac Asimov called him "one of the best writers in the world, far more skilled at the art than I am. (11:1)" Ellison is adamant in denouncing his categorization as a "science fiction" writer, preferring the much more appropriate term, "writer."

Why would Ellison not want to be classified in this field that has bestowed honor after honor onto him and his work? Most simply because that is not all he can and does do. On top of his work in fiction, throughout his career, Ellison has continually written in the realm of non-fiction and journalism. In his words, "I have written almost more nonfiction, essays, columns and reviews than I have fiction. Which is quite a lot. (8:1)" Writing for such journals as the *Los Angeles Free Press* and the *L.A. Weekly*, Ellison covered topics ranging from beauty pageants to nuclear weapons, Ed Asner to suicide cults, space exploration to Oreo cookies and all in between with sharp wit and silver tongue.

Ellison as a Literary Journalist

Not to be left out in this field, the International Journalism Society awarded him not only their “Silver Pen” for essays written in defense of the First Amendment, but also a special recognition award for, as Ellison so politely explains it, “a career as a pain in the ass. (8:1)” It was given, in fact, for his commitment to artistic freedom and constant battle against censorship. Writing nonfiction or even journalism does not in itself make someone a “literary journalist.” There are techniques that must be upheld to be truly considered an author in this field. Ellison’s journalistic work can be consistently deemed appropriate for study in the realm of literary journalism.

The most obvious technique that Ellison uses in his literary journalism is point of view. In most of his work in this field, Ellison uses two simultaneous voices: the voice of “Ellison” as a participant in the story and the voice of “Ellison” the author telling the story. This style can be disconcerting at times as he digresses to remind the reader that he lived through these events in order to write them. It has the possibility of breaking the flow of the story at most crucial of moments, but normally adds more to the story than it takes away.

Those digressions become another technique used by Ellison in his journalism. The story, no matter how light or heavy the topic, will always digress to Ellison’s opinions and any other information that pops into his head that he feels would add flavor to the piece. More often than not, these digressions do add interesting bits of knowledge that the reader might never have learned had it not been divulged to them at that time.

The question of access is consistently addressed, by Ellison directly, in his journalistic work. He is often proud of the lengths he had to go to in order to get to these subjects and stories. The details on how he achieved access to these situations (and often, the details on how he managed to get that access revoked) will be described right there (in the voice of “Ellison” the author) in the piece.

Slice of life details and symbolism are also techniques that will be seen in almost every piece by Ellison. He has an affinity for loquacious verbiage as well as a mind capable of dictat-

ing new jargon and he is not apprehensive about utilizing either technique as a symbol of the scene he is depicting. Ellison's slice of life stories typically work because he does not include them unless he feels they will be of interest to the reader.

Most of Ellison's journalistic work has been compiled into book form, which allows easy access to anyone who chooses to study these articles. Unfortunately, while there have been volumes of critique covering Ellison's career in fiction, very little scholastic evaluation has even been attempted of his literary journalism. His work in this field is comparable to many of the great, and often studied, literary journalists such as Stephen Crane, Jack London, George Orwell, Thomas Cooke and especially, the "Gonzo Journalism" style of Hunter S. Thompson. Ellison's work deserves to be shelved alongside those and many other creative writers in journalism.

Newsweek: Heaven's Gate

Thirty-Nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide in March of 1997, believing that they were leaving their physical bodies in order to meet up with "higher beings" in a UFO that was flying in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet. Circumstances surrounding this mass suicide lead experts to believe that the cultists were deeply into science fiction.

Newsweek requested this piece from Ellison as they attempted to discover any possible connection between the Heaven's Gate mass suicide and science fiction. Ellison had his own ideas about how to use this national forum.

The second sentence of this piece definitively answers the questions posed by *Newsweek*. "What did the Heaven's Gate cultists have to do with science fiction? Try this for an answer: nothing. (13:1)" Immediately following that statement, he does correlate the cultists with "that hideous verbal crotchet 'sci-fi.'" Ellison warns that these two terms are not even remotely related, and threatens anyone who confuses them. He impresses upon the reader his view that "sci-fi" and "science fiction" are two completely separate entities, spending more time with this relationship than discussing the situation with the cultists.

After those first five sentences, Ellison digresses to enlighten the readers of his own

recent brush with death after a heart attack and subsequent quadruple bypass surgery. This recurring theme in Ellison's work of digressing to give information about his own life and experiences is one that, while entertaining to the reader, is not always relevant to the topic at hand. In this case, he relates his near-death experience with what the cultists must have been thinking in their final moments. It is an eloquent example of this technique at its finest, bringing his life into the story but also tying it in to give both circumstances a higher meaning than they had separately.

An Edge in My Voice, Installment 6: Voyager I Flyby of Saturn

“This is Ellison in his rare, starry-eyed-wonder mode. (12:3)” Ellison is on hand at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena along with a horde of other reporters and scientists to witness “what no human eyes before ours had ever seen. (4:33)” He makes sure, as always, to note how he received access to this spectacle by thanking “Jerry Pournelle for getting me VIP credentials; I am far out of my depth, but I am at the eye of the hurricane and I owe thanks to Jerry. (4:37)”

The Voyager I flyby of Saturn revealed many things about the planet that had never been known before including a crater 80 miles across, 1100 mph wind speed on the surface and the fact that the planet's rings are braided. These details are admirably detailed as the reports come in over the course of this two day conference. Ellison ensures that the reader understands this is one of those moments that everyone will remember for the rest of their lives by correlating it to such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Manson family murders, Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination. Knowing that he is out of his league as far as knowledge in this field goes, he chooses to relate his experience in the first person, informing the reader of what he was going through and his emotions during these days.

Ellison even expresses his disappointment that more people recognize and congregate around Angie Dickinson when she appears in the auditorium than when Clyde Tombaugh, the discoverer of Pluto, arrives. He understands that not everyone cares as much as he does about the events happening around them and even details that discovery when he is driving home and

the evening news mentions the Saturn flyby at the bottom of the broadcast.

Ellison also makes a discovery that most of the other reporters most likely overlooked; “It becomes clear that the photos we’re being given for publication are merely bullshit PR. (4:41)” When all of the reporters and celebrities leave, the true scientific work will begin and additional discoveries may be made. Another rare discovery by Ellison is that people are not as unintelligent as he normally thinks, writing both “We ain’t so goddam dumb after all” and “I sigh deeply. Ain’t we a wonderful species. (4:41-43)” From those quotes, Ellison obviously writes in a speaking voice and uses dialect for this piece.

An Edge in My Voice, Installment 55: Norman Mayer

Ellison states in the interim memo before this piece that it “sadly, is my favorite of all the columns I wrote. (4:334)” Critics also have ranked it among the best pieces, fiction or non-fiction, that he has ever written (12:7). It is the story of Norman Mayer who, on December 8, 1982, drove his van up to the Washington Monument proclaiming that it held 1,000 pounds of dynamite. Mayer threatened to blow up the landmark if a national dialog on the threat of nuclear weapons was not initiated. This was the start of a ten-hour standoff against the police, FBI and the saturation TV coverage that had gathered at the “event.” Keeping with his style, Ellison covers this story from the first person perspective of someone watching the details unfold on television. He makes himself a participant in the story by revealing his thoughts about Mayer’s actions and the actions of authorities “handling” the situation.

Ellison’s access is described “after having written all night and being unable to sleep, I was tuned to Ted Turner’s Cable News Network, as the first live on-site pictures of the ‘emergency’ broke in on regular telecasting. (4:336)” He does not hesitate to point out how wrong the actions of authorities on the scene were, and how obvious it was that Mayer posed no threat and did not have any dynamite in the van. “Common sense dictated the conclusion; it didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes and deductive logic to know the truth. Everything the man in the black helmet *did* led one’s reason to the conclusion. It was a bluff. (4:336)”

The idea of common sense is repeated throughout the piece, as it is obviously the criti-

cal factor that Ellison feels was neglected by the police and FBI in handling Mayer. Ellison again interjects himself into the story by giving options of how he would have handled the situation had he been someone in power that day, but in the end, these were not his decisions to make. Mayer was shot by authorities when he became frightened and attempted to flee.

Very little dialog is used as most of the events are shown from Ellison's perspective of watching at home, but when he does quote Mayer, it is very powerful. He reports that the FBI special agent who reached the van first found a lying Mayer mumbling, "They shot me in the head. (4:337)" The fact that no one in a position to do something about this event used common sense frightens Ellison. He realizes and attempts to convey to the readers that this man was not a terrorist.

Ellison even goes so far as to make religious comparisons of Mayer to Christ by concluding that "at this holiest of holiday times...light one extra candle this year. For Norman Mayer, a sad and driven mad old man who cared enough to take a few too many steps in our behalf. (4:339)"

Sleepless Nights in the Procrustean Bed: From Alabamy, With Hate

From Alabamy, With Hate is Ellison's record of his participation in the March on Montgomery with fifty thousand other civil rights activists. He has placed himself in this situation not only to get the story, but more importantly, because he believes in the cause. The introductory paragraph is a stunning representation of the social symbolism of this part of the country at this particular time in history.

Thursday, March 25th, 1965. A walk through the country of the blind. Montgomery, Alabama – stinking in the heat of its own decay; sweltering in the viciousness of two hundred years of murder and bigotry and moral wretchedness; poised with the invisible artifacts of its hooded aristocracy: the hemp lynch rope, the 12-guage shotgun, the befouled "separate but equal" toilet, the electric cattle prod, the killer caravans by night and the final paycheck by day. (3:110)

His motives for going become his access. The simple statement that "it was time to act (3:110)" becomes all Ellison needs to join others with the same sense of urgency in their movement toward Alabama in an attempt to achieve some change.

His hatred for police on the wrong side of the law becomes even more apparent after he reports of additional senseless killings. “Damn them! Damn their twisted, stunted, warped minds, their rotten and corrupted beliefs, the frenzied and hideous *doppelgangers* of Hitler’s storm troopers. (3:111)” Even the troops sent in to protect the marchers were not above Ellison’s disdain. “God save us from men who do what they despise doing, simply because they are ordered to do it. (3:113)”

Dialog does not appear in this piece until the marchers begin to meet with first the troops and shortly thereafter, the racist demonstrators lining the U.S. Highway 80 route between Selma and Montgomery. When this dialog does begin, it is with harsh language and racial slurs that were to be expected during these times. What was unexpected was that these horrible tenets were being spoken by what Ellison calls “a gaggle of middle-class white women, the cream of Southern womanhood.”

“Nigger-lovers!” the blonde screamed, harridan.
“Mother fu –” the words were drowned out by the chants of the “lower class” Negro marchers. (3:115)

One beautifully handled event and dialog did occur between Ellison and three Southern women sitting on their front porch watching the march. He was thirsty and decided to go ask them for a glass of water. The rest of his group of activists prepared themselves for trouble, knowing that these people wish them no good. Ellison politely walks up to the women, asks for and receives a glass of water. The dialog here is subtle and powerfully descriptive at the same time.

“We aren’t all as bad as they tell you we are down here,” she said, and seemed infinitely sad about it.

“As bad as what, ma’am?” I asked, playing both boyish and cute.

“...
“You know. We just aren’t *all* that bad, honest.”

“Yes ma’am.” I smiled at her. “But some of you are, and if you sit back and let them ruin your lovely state, then you’re as guilty as they are. I came all the way from Hollywood, ma’am, just to see if I could help.” ... “Thank you, very very much, ma’am,” I said and smiled, allowing the left-cheek dimple to show itself.

“You just tell ‘em we gave you a glass of water.” The redhead smiled, thinking she was sewing it up.

And if I’d been black? I thought. I didn’t say it, because the idea was to show them there were other ways to do it, not to antagonize them. (3:116)

In the end, Ellison comes to the realization that while what he did that day was good, it was by no means extraordinary. And when it was over, he was free to go back to California, unlike the people who lived in Alabama and dealt with these situations daily.

“And now it’s over. I did one day down there, that’s all. No big deal, no special feat, no extra blue ribbon. One day.” ... “I was coming home, and all I could think was: ‘Please, please, dear God, let me the hell out of this stinking place! (3:120)”

Harlan Ellison Hornbook, Installment 35 & 36: Death Row, San Quentin

This piece starts as if Ellison has the readers sitting around a campfire, about to spin one of his spooky, wild yarns. “Did I ever tell you about the time I visited Ronald Fouquet in the death cell at San Quentin?” he asks politely. “It was one of the three or four most terrifying, chilling experiences of my life. (6:191)” And with a life as rich as Ellison’s, that is quite a boastful statement.

Again, Ellison almost immediately gives the reader an explanation of his access to this particular situation. In this case, his attorney, Barry Bernstein asked him if he would like to see Death Row. Bernstein had decided to dress Ellison in a suit and arm him with a briefcase, legal pad and pens, to pass him through security as his law clerk.

After relaying all of the details of his access as well as the specifics of their trip to the prison, Ellison dives into the specific details of the crime that landed Fouquet on Death Row. Fouquet murdered his stepson and reprogrammed his stepdaughter so she would not remember her brother or anything else about her life. Then Fouquet and the children’s mother dropped her off on the side of the freeway. What they had not expected was that when she was found, a nationwide search for her relatives would ensue. Fouquet’s wife eventually cracked and he was convicted of Murder One and sent to San Quentin.

The weight of evil acts that had taken place in the prison settles on Ellison as he enters the gates. “I found it difficult to breathe. My chest hurt. Imprisoned in those stones and that ironwork were god knows how many years of pain and loneliness and brutality and evil that had seeped into the very pores of the prison, exuded by all the men who had lived and died

there,” he professed. (6:196) Though he had been imprisoned himself in the past, it had been nothing like this.

As Ellison and Bernstein walk through the prison, he lives another emotional experience. The prisoners begin whistling and cat-calling at them as if they were fresh, sexual objects in the same degrading manner that many women are exposed to regularly. Ellison depicts the scene in gritty and vile detail, in much the same tone as what would have been going through his mind at that moment. “My asshole was suddenly, for the first time in my life, something more than an orifice used to void my bowels. My mouth was being looked at in a very different way than ever before. I was frightened, and chilled, and wanted to turn and run. (6:198)

Even when they finally meet Fouquet, Ellison chooses not to use dialog, and instead retells the story in his own words. This technique allows him to interject his own thoughts throughout the conversation and keep a safe distance from the actual events. He describes Fouquet in great detail, basically pinning him as a terrible person and concluding that Death Row was where he belonged. Dialog is not used until they finish the meeting with Fouquet and exit to talk to the guard.

The final segment of the piece is especially eerie as Ellison recounts what has happened with Fouquet’s case since this meeting. His Murder One judgment was reversed and he pleaded guilty to Murder in the Second Degree. With that plea, he received a fifteen years to life sentence. On that type of sentence, the prisoner is eligible for parole in three years and at the time of this writing, Fouquet had already served that amount. “There are worse ways to live than dying. (6:206)”

Memos From Purgatory

In Ellison’s most ambitious attempt at literary journalism, he spent two months running with a kid street gang in the Red Hook district of Brooklyn for research on a novel he wanted to write. Borrowing from Hemingway’s idea that “A man should never write what he doesn’t know,” Ellison set aside his conventional lifestyle, donned the “easily identifiable status symbols (the hair d.a., the black jacket, the boots, the insolent curl to the lips)” (1:31) and set out to

research juvenile delinquency.

This idea was not only Hemingway's thought; great literary journalists of the past as well as Ellison's contemporaries were attempting the same idea in a wide range of settings. Jack London spent time living as a homeless person to gather data for his work *The People of the Abyss*. Similarly, George Orwell lives as a tramp in London while researching for *The Spike* and Marvel Cooke poses as a day laborer in *The Bronx Slave Market*. It is a tried and true method used by many journalists throughout history to gather information they would not have access to in their everyday lives.

Ellison continues his technique of leading off stories with how he achieves access to this situation. He chooses not to show up one of the gang members, but instead to fit in with them. Luckily for Ellison, he made the right moves and decisions. They accepted him almost immediately, and for the rest of the story, he would be known as "Cheech Beldone." But he was not yet a Baron.

The initiation scene is one of the most fully realized parts of this book. Ellison spends an extraordinary amount of time painting the picture of what he is seeing, hearing, smelling all around while they prepare to accept him into their ranks. "The room was tastelessly furnished in Period Squalor. Great spring-thrusting Morris chairs, a down-at-the-legs sofa without cushions, a sling chair that had been slung once too often. Packing crates and old orange cartons did yeoman duty where chairs and tables could not be found. (1:46)" This type of description continues for pages as he describes the setting for the upcoming ritual.

The oath to the Barons is laid out in extended dialog, using another common technique of Ellison's: the multiple voice. He is both Cheech Beldone taking the oath and Harlan Ellison the author of this story, describing how he felt then as well as how he reacts to those feelings now.

Immediately after completing the oath, he had to survive the initiation. The first obstacle is overcome using brains instead of brawn, a recurring theme in Ellison's work. The second portion of the initiation became a bit more complicated. Ellison was to choose one of the

“Debs” – girls that hung out with the Barons – and take her into a private room for a brief sexual encounter. This became a difficult decision because he had to pick a girl who was not already taken by another Baron or considered “shared property.” He selected a delicate, high class Deb named Feline, whom most in the gang had passed over because they believed her to be a virgin. If Ellison went through with this, he would be committing statutory rape since he was 21 years old and she was only sixteen. He does not say straight out what happened in that room, but from the details he gives, Ellison made the decision to live the part of Cheech Beldone fully that night.

How do you equate morality, ethics, good or bad – in a pitch-black basement room with nothing but a bed and a pretty girl?
Sometimes the right things get done for the wrong reasons, and sometimes the wrong things get done for the right reasons.
I had a feeling she wouldn't be alone when she cried, later. (1:57)

After that night, two out of the three initiation rights had been cleared. The only thing Ellison had left to do was participate in a rumble to become a full-fledged Baron.

The chapters after Ellison's initiation into the gang are dedicated to explaining life on the streets and how the gangs interact with each other and amongst themselves. It is not until Ellison finally gets involved in a rumble that things kick into high gear. In depth detail, scene by scene construction and dialog are all used to explain every moment of this intense battle. This “Comanche style” fight was between Ellison and “Candle” of a rival gang. Comanche style involves tying one hand behind each participant's back while each clench opposite ends of a handkerchief between their teeth and fight with knives held in their free hand. Page upon page of stress filled seconds are portrayed in violent detail as the two men go through this dance of death. In the end, it is Ellison who prevails.

He went back down, bits of him all over the place. But he wasn't finished. He tried it again, and this time I took him under the chin with the toe of my boot. His eyes rolled up in his head and he gagged and puked and fell right back over, the knife still clenched in his fist. (1:81)

As powerful as the account of this fight is, the huge gang versus gang rumble finale of the book was still to come. Ellison spends a few chapters describing the events that lead up to the big showdown, trying to explain why these kids would put their lives on the line for the sole reason of protecting their turf.

When they arrive at the designated spot for the war, Ellison again breaks out of the thoughts of the past and reminds the readers that he is a reporter under these violent circumstances only to gather the story. After that last bit of Ellison the author, he becomes one of them. “I wanted to kill, too! Like sharks smelling blood. Go! (1:108)”

During the heat of battle, Ellison lands in the bushes; beaten, bloodied and passing in and out of consciousness. He wanted to get back up, but his busted body would not allow it until sirens and screams alerted him that police were on the way to bust the gang members. This became Ellison’s only way out of the gang lifestyle. He had to leave then and there after eight weeks of living with these people and never look back.

I changed clothes after showering, and rolled up the apparel that had belonged to Cheech Beldone. As far as I was concerned, he had been killed back there in Prospect Park. I cleaned out every little thing in the room that might lead anyone back to me. I packed it all in a paper bag and left the room and the neighborhood. I caught the subway uptown, and changed at Times Square.

...

Then I fell down on the bed and slept.

When I woke, after hours of terrible dreams and restless tossing, I was not purged, but Cheech Beldone was gone. I was Harlan Ellison again, and I was out of Brooklyn, and off the streets. I did not know what had happened to Pooch, or Feline, or Fish or Fence or any of them. All I knew was that I was safe, and hadn’t been hurt, and would never, never go back. (1:113)

Conclusions

Though he has been stigmatized throughout his career by the puerile term “sci-fi,” Harlan Ellison has been able to become much more than a standard writer of a particular genre. His work can be read, watched, listened to, played as a video game, viewed on the internet and digested in any format other conceivable. Ellison has worked in almost every form of writing available, and has won awards in most of those fields. He can definitely be listed as a science

fiction writer, but to pass over the rest of his work is to miss out on many fantastic stories.

The stylistic techniques that Ellison chooses to use are consistent throughout his body of work whether fantasy, fiction or fact. He has discovered his voice and it is one that no topic has been able to conceal. Though it may not be where he is shelved in the library, Ellison deserves to be mentioned with the greats in the field of literary journalism

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