



"Is the text set in stone?" The bluish light from my monitor stung my eyes. It was a late evening email from Jonny Steinberg, undoubtedly one of South Africa's most significant contemporary writers of non-fiction. He was worried about my inability to translate a telephonic interview I had conducted with him a month before into intelligible copy.

"As I said to you on the phone, a verbatim transcript of a verbal conversation seldom works in writing; it always has to be 'translated' a little. And this is no exception. I think that in quite a few places, the text simply makes no sense at all. It could be dramatically improved with a little judicious editing. Is it too late for that?"

And so I went back, embarrassed, to my text. It was something I should have expected: Jonny Steinberg, after all, is well known for sharing his manuscripts with his own subjects, and editing or erasing parts of them in accordance with their wishes. By sending my text to him, I was inviting the same.

It's not a usual journalistic habit, but it's never seemed to scupper his ability to release compelling and honest books. Indeed, among his *Sunday Times* columns and numerous monographs, Steinberg is best known for his book-length narrative non-fiction, including the Alan Paton award-winning duo of *Midlands* (2002) and *The Number* (2004), as well as *Three-Letter Plague* (2008) and *Little Liberia* (2010).

His intellectual and narrative agility has allowed him to construct a succession of terse and delicate mappings of shame, tension and mythology in the interiors of seemingly opaque phenomena: HIV stigma in the Eastern Cape, prison gangs in the Western Cape, racially-charged land disputes in KwaZulu-Natal, and many more, all seemingly overlapping and zigzagging together with the myriad lives he documents.

Characterised by an at-times overwhelming narrative presence, Steinberg's narratives are founded on – and driven by – his relationships with his subjects. Over and above the numerous insights that his mix of reportage, biography and ethnography unearths, his books provide an excellent case study of a journalist negotiating and re-negotiating the transactions of intimate emotions and interiors between himself and the people about whom he writes. One step further than merely showing the process of writing the story, Steinberg often chooses to make that process the story itself.

So, in the spirit of one writer's methods, I present this discussion between Jonny Steinberg and myself, an edited discussion about the difficult balance between a writer's promises to his readers and his ethical obligations to his subject; about positionality, empathy and authority, and about the state of non-fiction in South Africa in general.

And, no, he didn't ask me to remove anything.

## RUMMAGING IN PRIVATE WORLDS

**Nick Mulgrew:** In each of your books there is a transaction of interiors between you and your subjects, each one taking place within a fragile web of contracts and obligations between you, your subject and your readers.

For example, when *Little Liberia* was published in 2010, reviewers picked up your admission that you went through your manuscripts with your subjects before they went to print. Some saw those negotiations with your subjects, and others like them in *The Number* and *Three-Letter Plague*, as transgressions of an unspoken contract between you and your readers: you seemingly had a duty to lay your subjects bare for them, but you are instead covering up parts of them, so to speak. How do you balance that conflict between your ethical obligations to your subjects and your readers' expectations?

**Jonny Steinberg:** I think there's always tension between what a reader expects and what the writer's obligations to his subject are. Whether they know it or not, what most readers of narrative non-fiction demand is that the writer transgress: they want to peer over his shoulder as he rummages through his subject's private world. If your research subject is not somebody who understands that that is the game, that they are giving away things to an audience that might not care much about them, then you have an obligation to tell them that. But you also have an obligation to your reader to write a readable book. There are extreme cases where you need to choose between satisfying your reader and doing right by your subject.

One of the ways I sometimes try to get out of that conundrum is by making a big thing about it in the book itself. I tell the reader and the subject about my unease and it becomes a part of the book; part of the drama, as it were. It's my way of trying to have my cake and eating it: to satisfy my reader and to satisfy my ethical obligations to my subject is to make the problem itself a part of the story.

**NM:** I think I have noticed a progression in your books with regard to your tendency to discuss that sort of tension. In *Midlands*, your first book, you seem to be quite emotionally detached from your subject, probably because, by your own admission, you didn't like him very much. As you entered into closer, but more difficult, relationships with subjects like Magadien Wentzel in *The Number* and Sizwe Magadla in *Three-Letter Plague*, it became a more prominent feature of your narratives to describe your relationships with your subjects, discussing your differing viewpoints on their lives, showing them your manuscripts, and the like.

You say that you think it is unconscious, but do you think it became more of a necessity to explain that tension as you entered into more proximal relationships in your later narratives?

BY NICK MULGREW

**JS:** Firstly, I’m not sure those things are any less prevalent in *Midlands*. I think, in a strange sort of way, my relationship with the farmer plays more of a role in the narrative than in the other books. The fact that the story I am writing may condemn him hovers menacingly throughout it.

As for my inner feelings: I think my presence in my work is much more shadowy than the presence of my subjects. The exception is *Three-Letter Plague*, in which I went into my interior, almost as a substitute for my subject’s, because he wouldn’t show me his. The course of the narrative required me to go into somebody’s interior and he wouldn’t give me his, and so I had to offer up my own as a kind of a proxy for him. It was a way of getting to him when he wouldn’t let me in. It was more a moment that was narratively strategic than a moment of progression in my writing career.

**NM:** Do you think that conducting an investigation of your own interior, based on your own experiences and cultural upbringing, is an honest and effective way of navigating somebody else’s interior, especially when they won’t offer it to you?

**JS:** I think that any non-fiction book has to deal with the question of authority: how it knows what it knows. That question is heightened when you go into a world that is not your own, or at least one that is very different to your own. If I’m ever going to understand that kind of world with any depth or complexity, it’s through my personal relationship with people who live in it.

I feel that I should show the reader how this relationship evolved and therefore how I know what I know. It is in part a question of earning authority.

I know that other people have written very effective books in which they are invisible; they screen themselves out completely and make no appearance in the book. I respect that way of working, but I don’t know how to do that.

**NM:** Is an empathetic connection with your subject important to you on a personal level?

**JS:** Well, it doesn’t have to be empathetic. It can be hostile, even. It’s a route to knowledge, and it’s a route to know more about the world I’m writing about.

**NM:** That said, have you ever found anything that was irreconcilably other to you, such as the role of witchcraft in the rural Eastern Cape, something you said in *Three-Letter Plague* that was “deeply foreign” to you?

**JS:** Yes, but in the end it wasn’t witchcraft. I had trouble with witchcraft in the beginning because it was exotic, and that was bad. I needed to try to understand it and describe it, and in

the end I think I did. In spending days and days with Sizwe, I think I got a sense of what it means to have an invisible world shaping your own in such intimate ways.

I think there are other instances, however, where there were dimensions of experience that I never got near to understanding. One of them is, oddly enough, not witchcraft, but Christianity in the Liberia book, where both the protagonists, Jacob and Rufus, are devout Christians. That was something I just wasn’t inquisitive about. They didn’t speak much about it, and I didn’t ask much about it. That was a huge mistake because it was very much a part of them. I look back on it now and wonder why part of me was asleep to it, because it is so obvious that, if someone is a devout Christian, you must know what it means to them. And yet I didn’t go there, and I don’t know why I didn’t go there. It was just this peculiar blind spot.

**NM:** Is it perhaps easier to be intellectually stimulated by something that’s exotic?

**JS:** Not necessarily, because I was very interested in Jacob’s secular intellectual development, which is not exotic to me at all. I ended up reading all of these terribly written Liberian tracts from the 1970s in order to understand Jacob’s intellectual environment, and I really enjoyed that reading.

I don’t know. I may have somehow subconsciously doubted my capacity to understand religious experience, and once there was this secular intellectual experience waiting for me, I thought, why not plough into that instead?

**NM:** Is it perhaps when you find yourself in a relatively close relationship with your subject, and when you’re caught up in their current concerns, that you find you have those kind of intellectual blind spots?

**JS:** That’s interesting, and I think that this relates to our discussion right in the beginning. I often find that there is a tension evolving in the narrative between me and the person I’m writing about, and often the tension is about our respective understandings of his life. I think a part of me likes the idea that I’m an outsider reflecting upon people from the outside, and perhaps seeing something that they don’t see.

So no, I don’t think I get swept up in them. I think that I always step back and always think differently from them about them. Or so I like to think.

**NM:** In the preface to *Midlands*, you said that every journalist hurts the person about whom he writes. On the surface, that seems like an axiom of biography, or, at the very least, an axiom of biography written in a context of emotional turbulence. Do you still think that’s true?

**JS:** No, I think that was hyperbole. It was a very restless statement. I think it’s often true, but I don’t think it’s inevitable.

The writer has purposes to write a particular book and the subject has purposes to co-operate, and where those purposes clash and align is really quite contingent. Sometimes everyone walks away happy.

**NM:** So it was more of a statement made in order to mitigate any potential misgivings?

**JS:** Well I think the sort of triangular structure that exists between writer, subject and reader lends itself to the subject being betrayed more often, but I don’t necessarily think it means the subject will be hurt. In the case of *Midlands*, the problem was more acute than in any of my subsequent books. I felt that the farmer Mitchell had handled a situation badly, and the next thing that happened because of his handling of that situation was that his son died. That is a hell of a thing to suggest about anybody’s actions and their repercussions.

**NM:** But I remember you saying once, in a seminar not too long ago, that narrative reaches shame better than any other device. Is it an ability to map of shame through narrative that makes narrative journalism so effective?

**JS:** I don’t think it’s only shame. I think that it’s anything deposited deep inside individual people, and shame is one of those things.

What’s really exciting me about the man I’m writing about at the moment, for example, is not shame at all. He feels very little shame. What interests me about him is a paradox. He is a refugee and thus had few choices. And, yet, paradoxically, precisely because he has been ripped out of his context, the choices he does make are much more consequential than the choices you and I make. I have only made a couple of decisions that has radically altered the trajectory of my life. He has made many. In a strange, very paradoxical way, his life has been shaped by his decisions more than my life has been shaped by my decisions. I’m quite fascinated by what it means to be a human being under those circumstances. I suspect that the knowledge that your decisions are so all important begins to shape who and how you love, whether you save money, what you dream about, and so on.

Narrative non-fiction is a wonderful vehicle with which to explore this theme and others, because it homes in on a person in very intense and intimate ways and asks what he’s doing and why. I think that narrative’s just designed to answer important questions like that.

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**NM:** And through these important personal questions, you're able to map the societal.

**JS:** That's always the idea, that these stories can resonate far beyond themselves, and that you can close the book and believe you know something important about the world more generally. But that should always be possible: any story about any individual life or set of actions is inevitably also about the world and times it happens in.

**NM:** Do you think that's the reason behind the recent surge behind this genre in South Africa?

**JS:** Well, in the first place, it's not just a South African phenomenon. Non-fiction is on a crest globally; it's much more read and much more powerful and influential than fiction in a way that wasn't true in, say, the mid-twentieth century.

I'm not sure what that's about exactly, but I think it's partly about television, and partly about the fact that real people are coming into living rooms in an intimate way for the first time in human history. Because of that, there's

a burning desire to know about real people and an obsession with authenticity in non-fiction.

So it's a global phenomenon, but here it has a South African inflection. Perhaps non-fiction has an extra kind of power in a country like ours. We live in a place that's changing profoundly and there's a great amount of uncertainty in all spheres of life, and if a book comes out that professes to show life beneath the surface, people urgently want to know that. I think that's what happened with *Midlands* and *The Number*. I don't think they sold well because they were especially good books, but because they were very carefully aimed to show a South African readership a very urgent and important part of life that they didn't know about, and I think a lot of people read them because they were useful in that way.

**NM:** So, is that how you see the purpose of your work? Is it something with which you hope to make a contribution to public knowledge, or is it something more personally fulfilling?

**JS:** Those things aren't mutually exclusive. I guess that I see myself as primarily a practitioner of a craft, and my main aim is to practice that craft really well, and to have left

an object in the form of a book that is good, in the same way as somebody who designs a building, or paints a painting, or even constructs a business plan does.

I also want people to read my books to learn about the world, and I hope they do. But that's so inextricably linked to craft: if a book isn't well crafted, it isn't a good book, and it won't have much social impact. But yes, one of my ambitions is that people learn something about the world that they didn't know before.

**NM:** And are you satisfied with how you're accomplishing that aim?

**JS:** It's hard to know what impact one's work makes. But, for instance, with *Three-Letter Plague*, I know that many medical practitioners read it, and that lead to many meaningful discussions about their work. That was enormously satisfying, because when I was writing the book I was absolutely terrified that I was getting the medicine wrong, that it was something I didn't understand. Having a lot of doctors read it and value it was important to me, because that spoke to its authenticity and meant that I wasn't just messing around. That was a real measure of success.