

Writing & Editing

“All You Have to Do is Catch The Stories”

by Miriam Adeney

My mother and father were born in the most beautiful place on earth, in the foothills of the Appalachians... It was a place where gray mists hid the tops of low, deep-green mountains, where red-bone and bluetick hounds flashed through the pines as they chased possums into the sacks of old men in frayed overalls, where old women in bonnets... shelled purple hulls, canned peaches, and made biscuits too good for this world. It was a place where the first frost meant hog killin' time and the mouthwatering smell of cracklin's would drift for acres from giant bubbling pots. It was a place where the screams of panthers, like a woman's anguished cry, still haunted remote ridges and hollows in the dead of night...

With these words, Rick Bragg begins his autobiography, *All Over But the Shoutin'*. Bragg is a Pulitzer prize winner and Southern Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*.

He is famous for the stories in his feature articles.

Stories never have been hard to find, according to Bragg. “To say I searched for stories would be a lie. I did not have to search. [Life] hurled stories at you like Nolan Ryan throws fastballs. All you had to do was catch them.”

In this issue of *InterLit* we begin a column for and about writers. It will feature reporters and storytellers from many parts of the world. Here we will explore how to catch stories.

Followers of Jesus are immersed in stories. Adam chose rashly. Abraham's career detoured. Hagar's parched throat learned to praise God once again. Solomon lusted. Jeremiah thundered. Esther confronted world powers. These biblical characters found God real and relevant not just in their holy moods but also in their troubles. As we read the accounts of these farmers, soldiers, scholars, religious workers, mothers, childless women, prostitutes, and eunuchs, we learn a lot. Observing what they did right and what they didn't, when they listened to God and when they ran away, we see better how to serve our neighbors in our time.

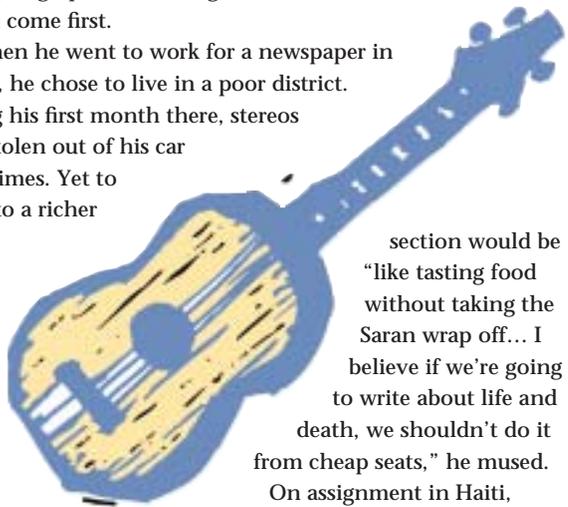
In our home countries, there are also kingdom stories that vibrate to be written. There are mature men and women with a lifetime of testimony to the grace of God. They represent a rich repertoire of wisdom. And there is a populace starved for good news that makes sense.

Some of the local saints are growing old. Will their stories die with them, never to be known by the next generation? Will your chapter of church history never be read by the larger world? Who will catch the stories?

Which brings us back to Rick Bragg. He grew up dirt poor but symbol rich. His grandpa was “a wizard with language... Like a lot of Southern men, he could tell a story and have you sitting dead quiet, waiting for the next word.”

Bragg himself started out as a sports writer, covering car races. When drivers crashed and died, it was customary to report the death in the third paragraph, following the race results. But as Bragg learned to shape words, he also learned to feel for the people he described. In time, he decided the order of his paragraphs was wrong: The death of a man should come first.

When he went to work for a newspaper in Miami, he chose to live in a poor district. During his first month there, stereos were stolen out of his car three times. Yet to move to a richer

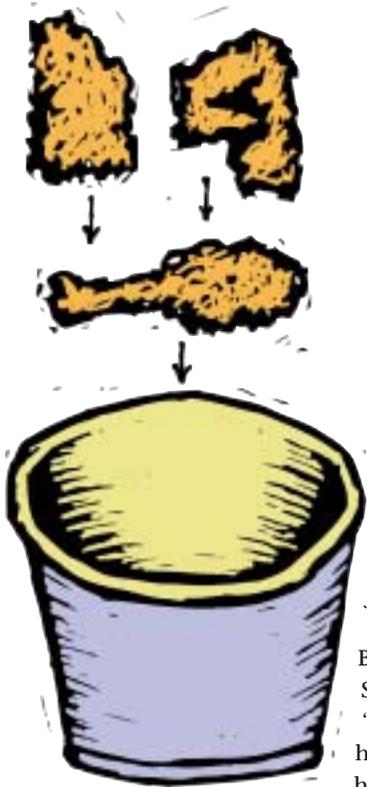


section would be “like tasting food without taking the Saran wrap off... I believe if we're going to write about life and death, we shouldn't do it from cheap seats,” he mused.

On assignment in Haiti, Bragg's taxi almost hit a little girl who was balancing a big bucket of water on her head. She stumbled back, and water spilled. The taxi driver paid no mind. For the taxi driver, “her life is an afterthought, a pothole, a speck on his bumper,” Bragg wrote.

But her story mattered to Bragg.

He wrote about rootless people, like the man in Miami who seemed insulted when Bragg asked if he was homeless. “I'm a musician, an artist. I'm not homeless,” the man told



Bragg. "I'm just here until I get my guitar. I'm not homeless. I'm just camping out."

He wrote about race. Bragg came from a poor Southern white family. "White people had it hard and black people had it harder than that, because what are the table scraps of nothing?"

He became aware that he owed something to his heritage in journalism. "To work in the Southern Bureau of *The New York Times* is to grab onto the flapping coattails of newspaper history, and hope your hands are clean. Legends did this job, in times of national crisis, in times when hatred and night riders ruled the region where I was born... It is as daunting as it is satisfying to cover your home for strangers."

Eventually Bragg won a scholarship to Harvard. This great university he described as "a Sam Walton Wholesale Warehouse of information and experiences." Here Bragg's style was honed. His natural tendency was to cram too many pretty lines too close, his instructors told him. Spread it out, they suggested.

Because Bragg did not have much formal education, some of his fellow students sneered at him. "Who taught you to write?" they snickered.

"The next time someone asks you that, tell 'em it was God," a professor advised.

When Bragg decided to write his autobiography, he vowed, "In these pages I will make the dead dance again." And he does. He croons, he coaxes words, he cajoles and conjures with the language. He unfurls cadence, dialect (words like *disremember*, *notions*, *reckon*), rhetorical build, and snappy endings.

Consider these word pictures:

* Snow—"Little specks of white, murdered by the warmth of the sidewalk"

* She "carried his memory around deep inside her like a piece of broken glass."

* He can "sound good at a dinner party, and shift languages like a Lexus changes gears."

* "I had always wanted to go to Haiti, the same way I'd wanted to touch my mother's hot iron."

* He "rolled up in a futon like a big old burrito."

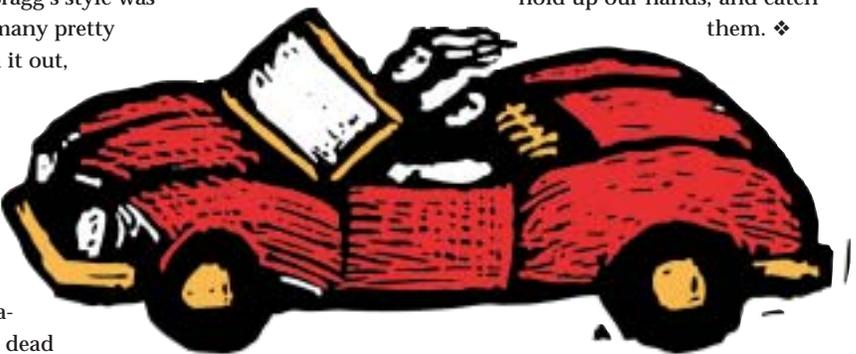
* She "walked in the shadow of her man, even as she kept him upright."

* "White Southerners are not all the same, like boards on a picket fence."

* "My grandmother, who fried me whole boneyards of chicken."

Bragg's own family story is studded with pain and love, betrayal and steadfastness. In his earliest memory, he was riding strapped to his mother's back while she picked cotton, dragging a sack through the fields. Life was tough. Still, every morning of his childhood he woke up to the smell of biscuits baking. He knew he was loved. That helped him see the stories all around him.

He didn't have to look very hard. Life hurls stories at us, according to Bragg. All we have to do is keep our eyes open, hold up our hands, and catch them. ❖



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