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The Sea of Information

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Andrea Barrett



THE SEA OF INFORMATION

I've always thought of myself as a writer more than usually dependent on news from the outside world. My imagination is nourished by old books, old bones, fossils, feathers, paintings, photographs, museums of every kind and size, microscopes and telescopes, plants and birds; I like to learn things and I thought—I still do think, although my ideas have darkened—that all this information feeds my fiction.

It wasn't so strange, then, to find myself excited by the slim gray book stamped "Property of the City of New York" and titled *What You Should Know about TUBERCULOSIS*, which fell into my hands sometime during 1999. Inside it I found photographs of children deformed by tuberculosis of the spine, of a young man perched on a tenement roof, gazing at the tattered tent and cot in which he is "taking the cure at home, in summer," of a young woman on a similar roof, bundled in mittens and a thick coat, smiling as she sweeps the snow from around her tent while curing "on the roof in winter." Copies of this book, I learned, had been passed out to public high-school students in New York City between 1910 and 1920, a place and a period I knew almost nothing about. Still, I found myself wondering what it might have been like to be one of the students, studying the book and preparing to answer the test questions at the end. Pausing, maybe, over a clumsy drawing of a tree being attacked by an ax; noticing that the trunk was labeled "Tuberculosis" and the many branches bore such names as "incapacitated workers," "thousands dependent on charity," and "hunchbacks," while the tangled roots included "poverty," "child labor," and "careless consumptives."

Perhaps that student might have flipped between the Tuberculosis Tree and the map of a nearby neighborhood, the blocks bounded by the Bowery, East Houston, Canal, East Broadway, and Columbia. Within that

Andrea Barrett

area, every building sheltering a known case of tuberculosis was marked by a black dot. There were a great number of dots; some blocks were almost entirely black and anyone living there would have known tuberculosis intimately. Everywhere people suffered while visitors, often unwelcome, descended upon them. Doctors, charity workers, public health officials. Visiting nurses, trained by a 1915 handbook to think that:

In the first place, tuberculosis is largely a disease of the poor—of those on or below the poverty line. We must further realize that there are two sorts of poor people—not only those financially handicapped and so unable to control their environment, but those who are mentally and morally poor, and lack intelligence, will power, and self-control. The poor, from whatever cause, form a class whose environment is difficult to alter. And we must further realize that these patients are surrounded in their homes by people of their own kind—their families and friends—who are also poor. It is this fact which makes the task so difficult, and makes the prevention and cure of a preventable and curable disease a matter of utmost complexity.¹

The *sound* of that language—the officious, pushy, condescending *sound* of that—along with the eerie photographs and the remarkable drawing of the Tuberculosis Tree, made me want to write a novel. The feeling was as sudden, as intense, and as irrational as falling in love.

Who can say why we're drawn to one person, or one subject? All I knew was that I was, and that the impulse was powerful. The novel would be set, I thought, in a public sanatorium; I imagined a sort of working-class, American version of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which is set at a fancy private sanatorium in the Alps in the years just before the First World War erupted throughout Europe. Mine would start a little later—but before the American entry into the war, I thought; I didn't want to have to deal with the war, which seemed like a whole other subject—and would explore not the lives of the rich and idle, but those of the working poor. A friend to whom I tried to describe it jokingly called it "The Magic Molehill."

Several things happened to that impulse, though, along the way.

One is that I used a description of that little gray book, and the world from which it had come, as part of a proposal, by means of which I hoped to gain a fellowship at the New York Public Library. There I planned to research the novel, and to begin writing it in congenial surroundings. A

The Kenyon Review

library seemed like the perfect temporary home for me. Over the past decade or so I've written about subjects as diverse as China during the Cultural Revolution, the evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace in the Malay Archipelago, the monk and botanist Gregor Mendel and his experiments with peas, nineteenth-century Arctic exploration, surveying and mapmaking in the 1860s, and the development of paleontology in nineteenth-century America. I've studied early conceptions of the formation of dew and rain, the founding of the utopian colony of New Harmony, and the manufacture of the glass eyes used by taxidermists to simulate life in stuffed game.

Ridiculous, I know. But by now, despite that, I've learned to follow where the spark of interest leads me. Often I'm drawn toward the past, and toward material involving natural history and the sciences; I can't explain that either, except to say that for me this material seems full of potential, charged and fresh and inspiring. Sometimes the stories *lead* me to the research: halfway into a sentence I may realize I don't have any idea whether a character climbing in the Karakorum range in the 1850s would be wearing hobnailed boots or metal crampons, and then it's time to study the history of mountaineering. Sometimes, as with the little gray book, I bump into things by accident, and they in turn either lead to stories, or bend stories already in progress into a different shape. But always, libraries have been my most dependable resource for this material. At the enormous library in New York, I imagined I'd find all sorts of secret treasures, as indeed I did. But I also found myself strangely lost, and in unknown territory.

Because I was granted that fellowship, my husband and I moved to New York City for a year. During that July and August I walked around the Lower East Side, looking at tenement buildings marked on the map in the gray book. In the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where we were living, I walked around the waterfront and inspected the shattered docks from which a largely immigrant population had stepped onto ferries headed for Manhattan. I walked around an old sugar refinery, hardly changed from the early twentieth century and still belching steam, in which I decided I'd have one of my characters work. I read Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and I flipped through old maps of the neighborhood, and I looked forward to the start of the fellowship itself, to the

Andrea Barrett

nine months during which I'd occupy a little office, grouped with fourteen other offices around a common area where I and my fellow Fellows might gather to share ideas.

We were a mixed group, I knew: four fiction writers, one poet, the remainder historians, biographers, and critics, studying everything from Ben Franklin's attitudes toward slavery to Russian iconography to the social history of an extended African-American family. I knew that the scholars were also excited by books and maps and unusual facts, although I had little sense, then, of the different ways in which we'd actually use the materials we found. We'd have access, I knew, to virtually any source we could imagine; fill out a call slip, and it would appear. This part I imagined as heavenly, and that turned out to be true. But what also turned out to be true was that the first day of our fellowship was September 10, 2001. We had our pictures taken, we met the staff, we got ID cards and had a tour. The next day, we were told, would be our first real introduction to the library's resources.

That morning I woke early, gathered my papers together, dressed, and then walked our dog to the dog-sitters' place in an old garage beside the East River, directly across from Lower Manhattan. On my way back to pick up my briefcase and head for the subway, I heard a thump and turned to see smoke and flames pouring out of one of the towers that had dominated our view since we'd moved there. Later, from the roof of our building, I saw the towers burn and fall.

This isn't meant to be an exploration of the effects of September 11, and so I won't include any more details about the next few weeks except to say that, unlike so many others, my husband and I were extraordinarily fortunate. Neither of us was hurt, nor were family members, nor close friends. We were bystanders, nothing more. But even for us, as for everyone, everything was different after that day.

Like many writers, I found myself unable to write in the aftermath of the attacks—not just fiction, but anything. What was the point? I thought at first, and for a long time after. But of course there's always a point: reading and writing are two of the ways we make sense of our mysterious, sometimes terrible, world. There were reasons why, all through the autumn months, the Main Reading Room at the Library was packed with people reading newspapers and books, searching for material on-line, talking to each other and to the librarians. Eventually I took my cue from

The Kenyon Review

those people pouring in off the street. It was through reading, which grew into a more directed kind of research, that I first began to try to grapple with what had happened.

I wrote, haltingly, an autobiographical essay about witnessing the attacks as a new *New Yorker*, but although there was some relief in trying to get a sketch of those weeks down on paper, I couldn't get at the heart of things; the experience was still too raw, and some of it was still going on. Anthrax was floating through the mails; subway trains were mysteriously stopped, rerouted, evacuated; buildings where I went to meet friends would be suddenly sealed, surrounded by armed men and flashing lights. The newspapers were filled with rumors and fresh horrors, with heart-wrenching photographs and rhetorical excess and calls for war. I found myself driven not toward these renderings of what surrounded me but away, toward other times and places in which similar events—events that felt analogous—had taken place. More and more I found myself delving not into what I'd once thought was the central subject matter of my novel, but into what had been going on around my characters in their sanatorium, which was World War I.

If novelists think, perhaps this is *how* we think: through a frenzy of metaphor-making and analogy-building, an accretion of meaningful images juxtaposed in ways that seem to us fruitful, although to someone else they might seem baffling. On different days (or sometimes on the same day, when I was feeling particularly lost), I read about the history of Brooklyn in the early twentieth century; the process of sugar refining; immigration policy; the histories of nursing, dispensaries, and public health; what it was like to live in Russian Poland at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; the Russian Revolution; the experience of Americans who enlisted with Canadian or British regiments during the early years of the Great War; the American response to the war before entering it; the military draft and how it was implemented; the uses of such chemical and biological weapons as gas and anthrax, both of which were used for the first time then; and the polio epidemic that started in Brooklyn during the summer of 1916.

I read, with a kind of terrible fascination, about a night in the middle of that same summer, when what had once been a munitions dump on Black Tom Island, warehouses and boxcars filled with shells and powder made here and waiting to be shipped to France, blew up in an explosion

so massive that windows blew out across Lower Manhattan and New Jersey, the ground shook in Brooklyn, and the island itself disappeared. German spies were blamed for that; German-Americans were blamed for having sheltered the spies. The waves of anti-German prejudice that followed helped shift American sentiment from neutrality toward participation in the war.

Why was I reading all this? Why do all this work, especially when I wasn't writing and didn't know if, when I started again, I'd find a way to use any of it? And especially when I might more usefully have been out in the world, helping someone, fixing something: cleaning up the rubble or raising money or aiding the families of the dead. Instead I read, which is what I do. I read like that—I have always read like that—because it's the only way I know to deeply inhabit a world other than the limited one of my own experience. It's the way I sink into the hearts and minds of invented characters, who incarnate themselves in the odd intersections of apparently disparate fields, and who then, if I'm lucky, manage to understand and articulate what I cannot. Reading, which gives me access to lives I haven't lived, am not living, probably won't live, is how I find my way to writing: in this case how I found my way *back* to writing.

And yet—for the first time in my life, I was surrounded by actual scholars as I read; who swam through a sea of information and marshaled facts in ways that were unfamiliar to me. As I listened to them talk about their own researches into history and culture and the intersections between what they were studying and what was going on around us that fall and winter, I was forced to think about how very differently scholars on the one hand, and poets and novelists on the other, approach their material. We not only do research differently, we do it in a different spirit, for a different purpose; and then we turn the results to different ends. My colleagues spoke about discovering new sources, about rummaging around in original sources, sometimes in several languages; about finding evidence and, from that evidence, constructing and testing hypotheses and then building chains of argument. Their process reminded me of science, seemed almost like a *kind* of science.

Because I'm so drawn to scientific material, I'm sometimes also drawn to its methods. But although I found my colleagues' approach both admirable and fascinating, I got lost when I attempted to emulate it. I've never been able to write unless I take a different, more wandering path.

The Kenyon Review

While brilliant fiction has been written by people who work rationally, write outlines, plan beforehand where they are going, and are able to think their way through the structure of a novel or a story, I've always had to feel my way more blindly and intuitively. There are excellent novels that *do* make arguments, and are as essentially polemical as a work of nonfiction: Dickens's *Hard Times* comes to mind. But these aren't the novels, for whatever reasons, that I most love; nor are they what I attempt to write. Usually what I'm trying to build isn't an argument, isn't overtly didactic, doesn't state its premises clearly, often doesn't operate linearly, and can't be reduced to a clear statement.

It took being in the company of this group of scholars to teach me that when I do what, up until then, I had always *thought* of as "research," I was only skimming the surface. I know a little about a lot of things, but the only thing I really know well is storytelling, in all its forms—and that's the end my so-called research serves. Although most of my fiction is set in the past and employs the materials of history, I'm not trying to discover new facts, or to develop new hypotheses, or in some sense prove "how it was." I'm trying to shape a narrative that allows a reader to *feel* what it was like to be a particular person, or set of persons, caught in a particular situation at a particular place and time. When I looked at the sugar factory in Williamsburg and dug up early photographs of it or articles about how sugar was processed there, I was looking for those details that would allow me to imagine *one person* working in and moving through that space; I was imagining it as background. A social historian, looking at the same material, might ask what wages were, what the ethnicity of the workers was, where those workers lived, who got paid what for what hours. Facts, from which inferences could be drawn. I was looking for something else.

I wanted what would help me not to tell, but to *show*. If I could convey what I wanted to convey by a set of logically ordered and clear statements, I'd do that. But a good novel or story or poem tries to convey a different kind of knowledge, and to operate on the reader in a different way, through the emotions and the senses. Facts can help *evoke* emotion, especially those that transmit texture, tonality, and sensual detail. But facts can't drive a piece. Research, no matter how compelling, may give me the bones of a fiction but never the breath and the blood. It's a wonderful, sometimes immensely useful tool that helps give me something to

Andrea Barrett

write about. But without the transforming force of the imagination, the result is only information.

In 1936, when a different war was looming on the horizon, Walter Benjamin wrote this:

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. [...] The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time.²

Information, information. I was drowning in it, one stream pouring in from the daily news of the world, the other bubbling up from the library stacks, while all around me people used it to build explanations for the present and the past. Every day I'd learn something more about the world, the war, tuberculosis, public health, propaganda. And every day I felt farther away from the writing itself. It was as if, to hark back again to *Hard Times*, I had turned while my attention had drifted into the student in Professor Gradgrind's class who, when asked to define a horse, responded:

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in the mouth."³

Caught up in learning about the equivalent of grinders and eye-teeth, I'd forgotten that while facts may be *in* a text—sometimes delectably—they can't *be* the text itself. Slowly I began to relearn something I'd once grasped, but had lost sight of: that emotion—that central element of fiction—derives not from information or explanation, nor from a logical arrangement of facts, but specifically from powerful images and from the qualities of language: diction, rhythm, form, structure, association, metaphor. And sometimes I also had glimmers of another thing I'd once known: how effectively information can be used to wall off emotion. How the gathering of information can take the place of actual

The Kenyon Review

understanding. I had built, as I am only now realizing, quite a substantial wall. As if any wall could block out those two towers.

As I went longer and longer without writing fiction, the novel I wanted to write—at that point still purely hypothetical—began to seem as if it should encompass not only the sanatorium experience, but also the experience of a country on the verge of entering a war. When I did finally start writing in the autumn of 2002, around the anniversary of September 11, what I began was no longer the novel I'd first imagined. Still, I thought this had to do with a change in the *kind* of information I needed—less about tuberculosis, more about the war. More recently I've come to see that the change is of a different sort.

There's no single, central character anymore, no one prism through which everything is refracted. Instead there are a tangle of characters talking to and through and around each other, struggling to make sense both of what's happened to them personally, and what's going on in the larger world: not just the distant war but the burgeoning implements and technologies of war, the changes in politics and society. Does that sound a bit like a group of people gathered in a library during and after a crisis, talking their way through the events of the day? Perhaps it does. A war, like an epidemic, happens to everyone; as autobiography, no matter how vigorously squelched, has a way of pulsing beneath the surface of one's work.

In this version of the novel, a character named Leo Marburg is among a handful of patients who, in a state sanatorium in the Adirondacks, amid a swirl of conversations about the war abroad and the contributions made to it here—chemical weapons, X-ray machines, munitions, eager volunteers—causes something to happen. It's pointless to say more about Leo or how I think the plot might unfold. Partly that's because I don't *know* yet—I can guess, and I can plan, but the experience of writing previous books suggests that I'll be wrong, and that I'll be surprised at every turn. Partly it's because plot summaries are boring. If the novel's working, I shouldn't be able to reduce it to an outline, and I shouldn't be able to articulate what it's really about. All I can say is that, partly through the experience of living in New York during that difficult year, the world of these characters keeps enlarging and the series of intersecting circles keeps widening.

The more I learned about the First World War, the more I saw how much it had in common with what was known at the time as the "War

Andrea Barrett

against Tuberculosis”: the material contained in the little gray book. Those wars overlap exactly in time—but also, more important, in their uses of propaganda and corrupted public language. The militaristic, and yet at the same time euphemistic, language of the “War against Tuberculosis” is very like that found in the documents used to whip up American support for entry into the war. The *sound* of that language interests me a good deal—it’s a sound that’s becoming familiar again. And it was sound—the rhythm and tone of a particular narrative voice, its diction and pacing and music—that helped me begin the actual writing. What I had experienced changed the novel; the new information I gathered was necessary to it; neither experience nor information were sufficient. What I needed was a resonant metaphoric framework, and a voice.

In the handful of pages I wrote before I had any real sense of where the novel was headed there’s hardly a single complete sentence, never mind a coherent paragraph. But even from those I could get a sense of structure, intent, and a kind of verbal patterning, despite the fact that most of the nouns—the facts—were still missing. Actual phrases and sentences are mingled with lumpy directions to myself, enclosed within parentheses—and these, not a chain of reasoning, led me on. This is how the first gesture sounded on the day I sketched it out:

“That summer, everything seemed to be crumbling (*disintegrating, catching fire, happening...*) all at once. (*see the NYC newspapers. Focus down a window of time—roughly the last week or two weeks of June 1916. Impending war with Mexico, news of the war overseas, all the local accidents and labor disputes, incidents of German sabotage*). A ship blew up, a train was (...); in France (*insert some event from the war here*), while a (...) was (...) in New York Harbor. A (... *insert two other trivial events here, from Brooklyn newspaper*).

“In Brooklyn (.x..) children had been paralyzed by polio on June (.y..), and another (.x..) on June (.z..). By the end of the month, (... *summarize the panic of the epidemic here; the children being turned back by police on Long Island, the families being rousted from their apartments, etc.*) In Greenpoint and Williamsburgh, (... *more examples here. Then end this opening beat, which has narrowed from Europe and all over the States, to New York Harbor, to Brooklyn, and down to Leo’s neighborhood, with this*):

“At the sugar refinery where Leo Marburg worked, three men had been dismissed on suspicion of sabotage after a fire broke out in the

The Kenyon Review

warehouse. Leo, now working more hours than usual, was exhausted. Two of his landlady's children were sick; his own head ached and the nagging cough he'd had since winter kept him up even when the children weren't crying and the ambulances weren't roaming the streets with their sirens shrieking. Each day he went in to work and (*summarize his routine duties here*).

"One Wednesday, early in July..."

Essentially that's an information-free passage; truly, writing can be ridiculous. And yet despite the obvious problems and omissions there's something—a kind of feeling, a structure, a tone—gesturing there. That something springs not from experience or information but from their synthesis and growth in my imagination.

Each time I try to do this, I relearn the lesson that I can't, during the process of writing, relegate imagination to an inferior place. I can't let research, my ally and comfort for so long, push its way to the head of the line. The work never comes alive until I give up the idea that I know what I'm writing about, and allow myself to be led—by the life that goes on outside us, in the world, and also by the fertile life going on in secret, inside our heads—into new and strange territory. Any text, I learn each time, is a tissue of the imagination, in which facts, if we choose to embed them, rest safely encysted.

By now, of course, that first, exploratory passage has disappeared, replaced by something that sounds almost shockingly different. But that too is part of the journey of the imagination, which the dictionary defines as: "the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality." A useful reminder that the imagination is founded in, flourishes on, *images*: pictures, fortified by sight, touch, taste, sound, and passionate emotion. One image leads me to the next, and the next; the next requires the revision of all that has come before, and on it goes.

So what is it, then, that I'm trying to say? I went to New York with an idea for a book, which was inspired by another book; the world changed while I was there, and so did I; the book I meant to write changed as well. Do I mean to say that writers should look within, or look without? That they should write from experience, or from research, or from imagination?

Andrea Barrett

Yes, I would say. Not either/or, but all those things. Writing is mysterious, and it's supposed to be. Craft guides a writer at every step, as does knowledge of earlier work; we accomplish little without those foundations. Research can help, if it feeds the imagination and generates ideas; a plan is also a wonderful thing, if a writer's imagination works that way. Groping blindly, following glimmers of structure and sound, is far from the only way; other writers work differently to good effect and any path that gets you there is a good path in the end. But one true thing among all these paths is the need to tap a deep vein of connection between our own uncontrollable interior preoccupations, and what we're most concerned about in the world around us. We write in response to that world; we write in response to what we read and learn; and in the end we write out of our deepest selves, the live, breathing, bleeding place where the pictures form, and where it all begins.

Notes

¹ Ellen N. LaMotte, *The Tuberculosis Nurse: Her Functions and Qualifications* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915). Reprinted in *From Consumption to Tuberculosis: A Documentary History*, ed. by Barbara Rosenkrantz (New York: Garland Publishers, 1994) 442.

² Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller." In *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 89-90.

³ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854) (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961) 4.

Andrea Barrett is the author of five novels, most recently *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, and two collections of short fiction, *Ship Fever*, which received the 1996 National Book Award, and *Servants of the Map*. She has received National Endowment for the Arts, Guggenheim, and MacArthur Fellowships.