

September 20, 2008

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Sometimes a Deadline Can Be Murder

By SETH MNOOKIN

John Darnton was 11 months old when his father, Byron Darnton, was killed off the coast of New Guinea while covering World War II for The New York Times. His father's sacrifice propelled Mr. Darnton toward his own four-decade career at The Times, a job that was filled with its fair share of adventure and excitement: in 1977, while serving as the paper's West African correspondent, he was jailed and then expelled from Nigeria, a turn of events that was least partly the result of his friendship with the marijuana-loving Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti.

BLACK AND WHITE AND DEAD ALL OVER

By John Darnton

351 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.95.

Two years later, when the Ugandan dictator [Idi Amin](#) was driven from power, Mr. Darnton was on the scene, poking around in the deposed strongman's basement refrigerator to see if he really did keep human hearts on ice. (He didn't.) He was in Poland for the birth of the Solidarity movement and the establishment of martial law, and he won a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for a series of dispatches he smuggled out to avoid censorship.

With this type of personal narrative, it's no surprise that a publisher signed Mr. Darnton to write a memoir about his father's influence on his own life. Mr. Darnton, however, had a more difficult time writing about himself than he did about others, he has said, so he turned to this, his fifth novel, as a "kind of avoidance book." The result, a murder mystery that unfolds in the newsroom of a thinly disguised family-run broadsheet headquartered near Times Square, is a satirical roman à clef that draws in equal parts from [Elmore Leonard](#) and [Evelyn Waugh](#).

When the book opens, The New York Globe is fighting for its survival, with the bean counters on the business side pushing for staff cuts and a crass New Zealand media mogul named Lester Moloch plotting a takeover. Those existential threats to the paper's identity seem less pressing after Theodore S. Ratnoff, a tyrannical assistant managing editor, is discovered in a pool of blood on the newsroom floor. Ratnoff was reviled for his withering put-downs of the paper's copy editors — "critical notes of Teutonic exactitude" — and attached to the editor's spine sticking out of his chest is a piece of paper with the same two-word phrase Ratnoff used when he would fire off the rare attaboy inquiring as to the author of a particularly advantageous headline: "Nice. Who?"

The story of Ratnoff's murder is assigned to Jude Hurley, a 35-year-old metro reporter who lives in an East Village walk-up with his German shepherd-Irish setter mix. Hurley, like his progenitor, is an old-school romantic, a shoe-leather reporter who gets off on "the adrenaline rush of working on deadline and nailing a story just right" and who clings to the quaint belief that a journalist's job is "to afflict the comfortable and

comfort the afflicted." When the novel opens, his most pressing problem is figuring out what to do about Elaine, his tedious "almost-live-in girlfriend."

He's soon overwhelmed by more immediate concerns, which include catching a killer, staying alive and navigating a nascent flirtation with Priscilla Bollingsworth, the overeducated homicide detective assigned to the case (and one of the novel's several clichéd characters). Ratnoff, it turns out, was just the first of the killer's victims, and as the bodies pile up in the newsroom, everyone from the beaten-down hack in the next cubicle to the scheming executive in the boardroom emerges as a potential suspect.

Throughout, Mr. Darnton does a wonderful job capturing the nerve-jangling excitement and ulcer-inducing tension that come with chasing a big, breaking story. One of the nicest grace notes in a book full of them comes after a close call, when Hurley realizes that he had "never come that close to death. But even more trying, he had never written so much on deadline."

In the solipsistic media world, much time has been spent tittering about the real-life antecedents of characters like Edith Sawyer, a floundering former hotshot who had done "a stint in Latin America, where, rumor had it, she bedded an array of dictators and banana magnates, emerging pregnant with stories," and Hickory Bosch, a disgraced former executive editor who "settled in an old saltbox cottage on the shore of Cape Fear, where he indulged his passion for clamming." That manner of insider arcana shouldn't intimidate the civilians out there; you don't need to have spent a lifetime obsessed with media gossip to enjoy this any more than you need to know that [Woody Allen](#) was referencing Fellini's "Amarcord" to appreciate the opening scenes of "Annie Hall."

"Black and White and Dead All Over" is above everything else a page-turner, but there's also a message contained therein. By the end of the book Mr. Darnton's respect for the life-and-death power of the written word is readily apparent: a pilfered paragraph from "War and Peace" leads to one character's downfall, the novel's denouement is brought about by a couple of lines of Byron, and a crucial plot point stems from an epically clumsy lead paragraph.

This always-present subtext, along with Mr. Darnton's palpable anxiety about the threats to modern journalism, brings him closer to the intent of his original task than it appears at first. Fittingly, his bittersweet nostalgia for a bygone era in journalism — one that Mr. Darnton and his father both embodied, in their own ways — is captured best in a toast offered up by Jimmy Pomegranate, a Falstaffian scribe with "the self-regard of [Orson Welles](#)" and a passport that's been stamped in 182 countries:

Here's to us
Who's like us?
Damned few
And they're all dead.

Seth Mnookin, a contributing editor at Vanity Fair, is the author of "Feeding the Monster: How Money, Smarts, and Nerve Took a Team to the Top" and "Hard News: The Scandals at The New York Times and Their Meaning for American Media."

