

# Details and War Writing. An Interview with Christopher Merrill

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**Tomasz Mizerkiewicz (TM)** An important aspect of your war writing is the role of the detail. How do details constitute your war writing? Why is there such a need for them? Is it influenced by the image of the detail?

**Christopher Merrill (CM)** My practice as a poet is what informs my travels. The American poet Howard Nemerov said, poetry in an act of attention, and I take my bearings as a traveler from the idea that the act of attending is what I do. By searching out the unusual detail I have a better chance of discovering something truthful about a situation. For many years I was a house sitter for W. S. Merwin, who said something similar—that a lot of his poems arise from him noticing something in his garden—a particular palm, say, that he has planted—and that has been my experience as well. Early on in my prose writing, during my first trips to Italy to cover the World Cup and then to war zones, I had to remind to myself to pay attention, to set time aside each day not only to transcribe interviews I had conducted but just to simply write down everything I saw, what I smelled, what I tasted, what I was reading, jokes people told. The daily act of trying to reconstruct things that happened over the course of the day forced me to pay closer attention. You mentioned images: it is difficult for a writer to compete with the images of war, but one thing that happens when you look too long at these images

of war you become numb. We have thousands of examples coming from Ukraine in the last three months. How do writers compete with that? They can't. What they can do is provide some of the texture around that image. Think of Vedran Smailović, the Bosnian cellist who played for 17 days straight in Sarajevo's Bread Market after a Serbian shell killed 17 bystanders. He played Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor," the score for which was reconstructed from the only page to survive the firebombing of Dresden, and his daily performances represented for me a new way to think about the artist's role in a war zone. Vedran was a complicated figure—among other things, he began to charge journalists for interviews—and rehearsing such details can render a scene and situation more complicated, closer to what lived experience is about. So, I'm always reminding myself to pay attention. A perfect example of that takes place in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, where I went on a cultural diplomacy mission; when it was time to fly back to Kabul, I walked with a diplomat—my control officer—across the runway. There was a stop light, as if we were on a street. The diplomat was panicking, wondering which plane we had to board, while I watched a predator drone take off in front of us—which the diplomat didn't see. It was sort of funny to see someone so far inside her own head, trying to do her job, that she didn't see the drone. That night, at the Embassy dining facility, I mentioned that I had seen predator drone take off from the air base outside Jalalabad. Another diplomat said, No, you didn't. Immediately I thought, that will go in a piece of writing. I had already written up my notes about what had happened that day, and now I had a larger context for what I might write: Don't write about this, the diplomat was saying, and of course I wrote about it. That's what writers do, right? The diplomats had given me a way to think about all the details I had registered during that mission, and I wrote not only an entry in *After the Fact* but also an essay for *Granta*. Everything I write is informed by my hunt for details.

**TM** How would you explain the form of attention appearing when you are witnessing the scene of war? Is it like you cannot get used to the situation when you are in danger and alerted by this state?

**CM** A heightened sense of danger usually propels me to pay ever closer attention to whatever I may experience. I have a metabolic need to take notes, because an act of attention, of observation, can help me overcome the fear I may feel. In my Poznań lecture, for example, I described spending a day in a basement in Sarajevo with shells landing all around us: how one man dealt with his terror by telling jokes, a woman took deep breaths, and I decided to write down everything—jokes, stories, conversations. I'll describe what happens, not with any hope that I would survive the shelling but with the knowledge that if I did survive, I would have made a record of this trial, which I might be able to shape into a piece of writing.

**TM** This may raise the question about the time gap. You are making notes about something that was imprinted on you because of what was happening and some very alerted awareness of the situation. The book that you wrote with Marvin Bell is titled *After the Fact* and there you use some notes from different places around the world you have visited, like Mozambique, Vietnam, Chile, Libya. How does this after-the-factness influence your war writing? There is the primordial scene of the Polish non-fiction writing in Ryszard Kapuściński's book on Iranian revolution when he arrived there when the revolution was over. Maybe sometimes you can see things correctly when you come after the fact?

**CM** Remember the conceit that Kapuściński starts with. He's got all those photographs spread across the floor, each one of which inspires a story; when he gets bored with one photograph, he moves on to the next. He has a tactical reason for proceeding in this way: he acknowledges upfront that he has arrived after the fact of the Iranian Revolution—hence the long digressions where he finds himself in rooms with different political activists arguing and smoking and making plans, all while he takes notes to try to make sense of what happened. So much of what occurs in a war zone is recorded by journalists arriving after the fact of a battle, a massacre, a bombing. Think of the revelations that came when Ukrainian forces liberated Bucha, a suburb of Kiev: journalists embedded with the Ukrainian troops were horrified by the videos the soldiers took. Enduring truths about those videos may come from writers who with the passage of time may see more clearly what they saw that day. I had the experience many times of writing a piece of journalism only to find many months later that when I went to rewrite it for a book that I had missed the import of what I had reported on, because I didn't see that larger thing, which is what we imagine the literary temperament to be about – teasing out the different meanings of what you find. When you see something terrible happen, your instinct is to write against it, but that's not the whole story, is it? A good journalist makes sure to hear different viewpoints. In my country, where we have Fox News airing rightwing propaganda around the clock, its audience tends to fall for a set of beliefs that are not tethered to reality. The real writer tries to break through propaganda of the left and right, in order to discover a more nuanced understanding of the facts. That's why *Homage to Catalonia* has survived all these years: George Orwell used the full range of his imagination to document for the age what he took notes on during the Spanish Civil War.

**TM** The state of after-the-factness stressed by the title of your book is very important. We live in the era of fake news, so we need this time gap, these after-the fact moments to make our own comments and see what was really happening within the space of facts. This is where writers need to operate.

**CM** We know that at this and every moment in history political figures and armies create the facts on the ground. A perfect example was Ukrainian President Zelensky going to the front yesterday, making sure to be videotaped close to the fighting: this is part of the information war that plays such a vital role in this catastrophe. Journalists captured what they could and then got out, thinking all the while about what was going on around them amid the sound of shelling, which might make it hard to hear Zelensky in the video. But awareness of that larger context is what a writer will later seek to try to understand.

**TM** At the end of Kapuściński's book on the Iranian revolution he observes the huge political effects of the everyday activities of people, he watches a woman who went to the office and tries to arrange something. This is what we find in your book, a similar perspective of everyday activities.

**CM** I'm happy to say I stole that from Kapuściński. Daily life is where the ordinariness of war takes place, with people just trying to survive. There's a scene in *Only the Nails Remain* that details a lunch with humanitarians, eating Danish ham, which was not good, and that sparked a debate about who had eaten the strangest meal in various postings around the world. When

I wrote up that scene I thought: what I'm describing is the daily life of war: fried bees and scorpions, different things from the sea. Then a psychiatric nurse said: That's nothing. Once in West Africa I ate the fetus of something. What was it? one of us asked. Something, she said, with a touch of wonder in her voice. This detail is so haunting, in part because it arises from a lunch of the blandest imaginable food. Remember these humanitarians are often young idealistic going from one disaster zone to another. How do they keep their balance? When I asked what they might be searching for, a long conversation ensued: sometimes when you are in a war zone you feel a little less crazy that you did back in the regular world. This seemed to me to be part of the larger story I was trying to tell.

**TM** Relying on some details you also need to rely on some informers and the relation with them in this special situation. For instance, in your notes about a man in Libya and his opinions. How would you see relationships that you establish in the scenes of war?

**CM** When I was just getting started doing these kinds of books I was living in New Mexico and became great friends with the nonfiction writer Frederick W. Turner who wrote books about his travels around of Gulf of Mexico, into New Orleans' jazz traditions, through the American West. He once told me that wherever he went he had a knack for finding someone who could explain that place to him. If you are a foreign journalist in a war zone, you need such a fixer and translator, you need one you can trust. When I wrote a book about World Cup soccer I brought my college soccer coach with me, and when I wrote about war, I used fixers and translators who knew how to open closed doors. They presented me with different kinds of possibilities of what to write about in the service of capturing the truth of the different conflicts that made up the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia. I would look very closely at them during interviews to ask: is this person saying this because of that or because of this? If he's taking you to dangerous place, you need to weigh what he is offering. For example, I wrote a magazine article when it looked like there might be a war between Serbia and Montenegro. I couldn't get a visa to Serbia, but I could get to Montenegro, where I found a fantastic fixer. I told him I wanted to talk to soldiers from the most recent battles in Bosnia and Kosovo. He set up one meeting with a war criminal and the next one with a sniper who shot people like the war criminal. The best part of this story occurred when it was time for me to go to the airport. When I went to check in at Montenegro Airlines, I learned that my flight had left an hour earlier, because they had only two planes and one was broken. What to do? The next available flight was four days later, so we went to the headquarters of Montenegro Airlines in Podgorica to see if someone there could help. Inside were three large posters with bold lettering: Africa, the Middle East, South America. I turned to my fixer. He said, These are places we wish we could visit. Then we sat down with a very beautiful woman, and when she stepped away to ask a colleague for help, my fixer said, We may not get you out of here, but at least we get to look at her for a while. Soon she returned with a proposition: If you will pretend to be an employee of Montenegro Airlines, we can fly you to Athens tonight, where we will pick up the Montenegrin national basketball team from the World Cup. From there you can find your way home. This crazy story embodied everything I came to love writing about the Balkans: a little corruption over here, war criminals over there. When I boarded the plane, which I had all to myself, the flight attendant told me exactly where to sit. Sometime later she came by to ask me if I had enough room. I guess, I said. In Athens I checked into a hotel, and

the next morning I told a Delta agent what had happened. He said, That is such a great story, I will find the way to get you home. Meanwhile I was paying attention, taking notes so that I would have a story to tell when I got home.

**TM** But there we can tell that there are two kinds of relations between fixers and writers or journalists. We have those called “parachuters” who come only for few days and seek for rather sensational materials and we have those who look for some other kind of contact with people at war and their attention is being attracted by other things as well.

**CM** You need parachuting journalists who have large platforms in order to get big stories out. But you also need writers who can take a longer view, looking for the telling details that might suggest other truths. I knew a wonderful photojournalist in Bosnia, named Elizabeth Rappaport, who said something I treasure: I like to get inside somebody’s beer. Which is to say: she was less interested in photographing horror than in the ways in which that horror can inform the quotidian. Thus, in an Ustaša bar in Croatia she took a memorable picture of civilians and paramilitaries toasting one another, the memory of which still makes me shudder. It was important for her to spend time developing relationships with people, to take a look around the corner. That is what I want to do in my writings.

**TM** You mentioned during your lecture in Poznań about the new journalism and Michael Herr’s book *Dispatches*.

**CM** When you think about Herr’s book, about Francis Fitzgerald in war zones, George Orwell, Martha Gellhorn, those who dig in for a spell to get the story – that’s the whole ticket. Another friend was a terrific daily journalist in Sarajevo. But he put this material into a book, it fell flat. I asked another writer why this book didn’t work, and he said: It lacked vitamin R, resonance. A book of literary war journalism has to be more a record of episodes; it has to have vitamin R. This is something you can teach, if you can point out what a writer discovers in the act of writing. Herr did that, and so did Neil Sheehan. Tim O’Brien wrote two great books about the Vietnam War, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*. But I like to tell students that when O’Brien returned from Vietnam, he wrote a novel, *Northern Lights*, which is not very good. Then he wrote series of non-fiction pieces for the *Washington Post*, which were subsequently collected in a book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. I think this work of literary journalism freed his imagination to write great works of fiction: once he got all the facts out of his system, he was free to invent—which points to a difference between daily journalism and what a literary writer might try to make.

**TM** There are images from war zones presented by strong media and attracting our attention, but sometimes writing creates images in different way and these images are more various. Maybe writers are re-creating images imprinted on their minds in the war zones?

**CM** I think there are structures of meaning we are or are not alert to. I remember that image from Srebrenica in *The New York Times* of a woman who hanged herself from a tree, which crystallized the terror of the war, the news reports on TV, in print, and in photographs. It may have inspired Bill Clinton to order strikes on Serbian positions. In thirteen days, the war was

over. But it took three years to get to that point—three years of journalists recording massacres and atrocities, laying the groundwork for military action to end the horror.

**TM** There are some iconic images that could be productive such as a pregnant woman in Mariupol's hospital, something you cannot remove from your mind.

**CM** Nor could you invent it. The horror of the Russian shelling of the maternity hospital is an emblem of their genocidal intentions. Of course, we read that Putin doesn't believe that Ukraine and the Ukrainian language even exist. A missile strike on a maternity hospital is the sort of image that can make a writer say: this is where I will begin to try to render the horror.

**TM** When you meet something you cannot invent, it complicates the situation of a writer who needs to compose it, to give it some form. You and your friend decided to give it a form of letters to stress this coexistence of what is authentic and what is composed.

**CM** I took a seminar with the novelist and *New York Times* book editor Charles Simmons. He said he was in a habit of writing to a dear friend a letter every Sunday night. Then one day he thought that instead of writing letters to him he would write a book of letters, which became his first novel. Marvin and I did something similar in *After the Fact*. There is an inherent tension in the book, he was 20 years older than me, from a different generation, and he was retired from fulltime teaching, while I was traveling around the world for the International Writing Program. He had his poetics, and I had mine. He was either in Iowa City or Port Townsend, Washington, and most of my dispatches came from distant places. What interested me is how this tension governed our first volume, which was subtitled *Scripts & Postscripts*. We finished the second volume, subtitled *If & When*, in the first month of the pandemic. And the unfinished third volume, *Here & Now*, was written when we were living five miles away from each other, unable to travel anywhere. What tension there was dissolved by the end, and we were both conscious of it. When Marvin summons childhood memories, he does it in a different way than I do, in part because mine were conditioned by my travels.

**TM** The problem of composition is always at stake. The writer needs to avoid making his work purely an aesthetic subject.

**CM** Think of Czesław Miłosz writing his suite of poems "The World" in the form of a school primer, describing idyllic scenes from nature to balance the horror of living in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. I begin *Only the Nails Remain* in the basement under shelling debating with some humanitarians what to read. I had Saint-Jean Perse *Collected Poems*, someone was reading *The Destruction of Yugoslavia*, and a third had an anthology of erotica. No one felt the need to read *The Destruction of Yugoslavia*, since we were living it. And no one cared for Saint-Jean Perse, because as Szyborska observed, "two people per thousand like poetry." But erotica – oh, yes, we believe in that, since our lives might be snuffed out with the next shell. What a complex relationship we have to different forms of storytelling in a war zone.

**TM** How did it happen that war writing became so important to you. Because this experience is ruining you and building again, how did you find your path in that?

**CM** It wasn't the path I thought my life would take. I was in high school when the draft for the Vietnam War ended, so there was never any danger that I would have to go to war. And yet here I am, having spent time in war zones in the Balkans, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq. I wrote a little book called *The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War and the Age of the Refugee*, which has a scene about a humanitarian friend with an armored personnel carrier picking me up at the airport. Her driver kept looking at me, and then he said, We went to high school together. Small world. He was the only graduate from this private high school to enlist in the military in the immediate aftermath of the war, the M̄y Lai massacre, the illegal bombing runs over Laos and Cambodia. It turned out that my classmate and I had much to discuss. I should note that my original journey to Slovenia was to write a piece for the nature magazine, *Sierra*, about two poets walking to the mountains after the Cold War. But in these wars of succession, of one order giving way to another, I glimpsed the outlines of a story I might be able to tell. When I finished *Only the Nails Remain*, I took this job in Iowa, thinking I was done with traveling. Now I would raise my family and run the International Writing Program (IWP). But the IWP is funded largely by the Department of State, which obliges me to travel as a cultural envoy to places of strategic importance, which in time included more hazardous travel—to Syria and Lebanon, Iran and Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq. I undertook these missions to help ensure that funding for the IWP would continue. But these travels were not unlike what I had experienced in the Balkans: war is a great clarifier about historical processes taking place at any given moment. My post-9/11 travels in the Islamic world were enlightening for me in the same ways as the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia were.

**TM** Since you are running this program in Iowa, let me ask how can you teach writers to write about war? There are no manuals for that, no techniques ready at hand.

**CM** It is the same preparation as for any writing endeavor, which begins with studying good models—which for me include the originators of modern war reportage, Tolstoy and Whitman, and their truth-telling heirs, Orwell, Gellhorn, and Michael Herr. Then you do what good young journalists do in a war zone: watch how their elders gather and corroborate facts, record anecdotes, and sift through material from interviews they conduct, imitate one and then another until they develop their own style and voice, and hope for the best. The intangible is the desire to go to certain places to tell a story. You either have it or you don't—which is why war can clarify matters for a writer: do you want to be there or not? After conducting cultural diplomacy missions to Libya and Iran, I sensed that Afghanistan and Iraq might be next on my itinerary, which meant I would probably try to write about these conflicts. I wondered how I would respond if such a possibility arose. In the end I agreed to go almost without a second thought. I was ready to tell these stories, from a different angle of vision than what had governed my travels in the Balkans. Now I would write from a diplomatic viewpoint, where I could see how things operate behind Fortress America, if you will.

**TM** I know that in your writing programs you sometimes rely on the kind of working that is meeting of the experienced writer and the young writer. Why do you think it is so important? Is it meeting of these two situations, tension caused by different positions of writers?

**CM** If you teach a semester-long course, a guest writer can offer not only a different way of thinking about writing but clarify some things for the students, ratifying or contradicting

previous lessons, offering a new perspective. My class *International Literature Today* relies on lectures by the visiting writers, who provide students with different ways to think about writing, each of which may inspire a student to try something new. A superb war journalist in our time, went to Iowa to study fiction writing. But it turned out that she is a gifted nonfiction writer, and in her journalism, she deploys what she learned in the Workshop, the writerly habits she cultivated here, to write books about the wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Syria. For she has the skill set and courage to ask tough questions and uncover facts that will make their way into a book.

**TM** You have mentioned the process of clarifying, which is very interesting, because we usually connect the experience of war with totally chaotic events.

**CM** Oh, it's pure chaos, but as a writer you try to bring order to it, which perhaps I did in *Only the Nails Remain*. It has, I hope, a fair bit of humor, since that is one way people make sense of it all. I tell writing students to watch stand-up comics work, because they must distill language to its bare essentials and can teach you something about timing. To write about war you might want to watch war films to see how different directors frame certain shots and ask yourself why they did it that way. Can you do something similar on the page?

**TM** The last question is about memory. Do you have some detail that helped you clarify your writing, and maybe that has clarified you as a writer of war. Were there some moments and some details that made you realize that you are the one to write about it.

**CM** In the republics of the former Yugoslavia I was intrigued to see that poets and writers were taken seriously, as they decidedly are not in the United States. But the debates in literary and artistic circles in the different republics were not unlike some of the debates in American literary circles. So, I brought to the Balkans my own experience as an American poet. Take, for example, the great Serbian poet Vasko Popa, whose work I had first read in America: it meant something altogether different when I read it in Belgrade or Podgorica. This clarified some of my thinking about the poet's role in society. Likewise, when I interviewed Radovan Karadžić in Belgrade on New Year's Eve, 1992, I thought: what a buffoon. He was holding the whole world hostage to his murderous whims, and he was just an opportunist—a poet who was having fun killing people. That gave me insight, too.



# KEYWORDS

*war journalism*

NONFICTION

**ABSTRACT:**

In the interview Christopher Merrill explains the role of concrete details in war writing and war journalism. He reveals how drawing on details allows the writers to build the larger context for images of destruction and experiences in the war zones. Merrill recollects his memories from his trips around former Yugoslavia during the Balkan wars, from his journeys to Afghanistan, and other countries. He explains how to teach war writing by looking at good models. According to him only the challenging experience of the war zones lets the writer clarify if he wants to engage into war writing.

## DETAIL

### war writing

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Christopher Merrill – published seven collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them, *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*, *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*, *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War*, and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*. His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French government, numerous translation awards, and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial and Ingram Merrill Foundations. As director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa since 2000, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO from 2011-2018, and in April 2012 President Barack Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities. |