



Immersing yourself into the world of literary journalism – the interview with Rachel DeGasperis

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During the Seventeenth International Conference for Literary Journalism Studies at the University of Gdańsk I met Rachel DeGasperis – a journalist who’s interested in human-driven feature writing. She graduated from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) with a master’s of journalism degree and she also holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Toronto. After the Conference, we decided to dive further into the world of literary journalism and talk about the teaching techniques and the similarities between studying journalism in Canada and Poland, and also about creating “The Otter” – a long-form narrative online magazine developed by TMU’s Journalism Research Centre (JRC).

Zofia: I would like to start with a very philosophical question. Who is Rachel DeGasperis? How would you present yourself to our readers?

Rachel: I would say that I’m an aspiring journalist or a young journalist. I think I really love telling stories and that’s a core part of who I am. One of the reasons why I’m interested in journalism is because I’m fascinated with people and their experiences, and I think journalism is just such a beautiful gateway into the lives of other people. I would like to say that I’m like a storyteller. And I think that’s how I would describe myself.

Zofia: You were also TMU’s Journalism Research Centre research assistant. How did you connect both worlds?

Rachel: I think that has to do with Bill Reynolds, my instructor, and supervisor, who’s the head of the Journalism Research Center. His whole idea was to create this literary magazine – “The Otter”. And my role as the research assistant for the Journalism Research

Center was basically helping to get it off the ground with the help of my classmates. But my role was basically just organizing how the student publication would run and then also organizing the JRC events. So, we did one event on harassment facing women journalists. There was one on the history of the Associated Press. There's an academic component to the JRC, in the sense that we're creating panel discussions and events that people can go to that are purely informative. But then there's also the more hands-on journalism side, where I was the co-editor of this magazine publication, which worked in conjunction with my job as the research assistant.

Zofia: Could you tell us more about developing "The Otter"? Did you have to face any challenges?

Rachel: It started after the first year in our master's degree. Bill taught our narrative journalism class, and all of the students wrote long-form narrative features that we were really passionate about during class. All of my classmates wrote such interesting, fascinating, well-written, well-reported stories. And I think Bill felt the same way. And you could see how excited we all were about it. But when we would try to pitch it to publications, often they would get rejected. These stories should be read by the public, even if they're not published in an established Canadian magazine. So, Bill thought, what if we just created our own? In the summer, Bill started organizing it. He sent us all an e-mail. He was like: "Hey, I don't know if you guys are interested in this, but I think it could be really cool...". And a ton of us were. We started the masthead at the beginning of the school year. And then in terms of problems, not problems, but hurdles, it's just that we were all really busy during the school year. We're still students. We had to do our major research project, which is like the journalism version of a thesis. And finding time for it was hard, but we made it work.

Zofia: What do you do as a co-editor of "The Otter"?

Rachel: As a co-editor, the main thing that I do right now is "The Otter's" editing. I edit stories with Maddy Mahoney, other co-editor, and Anthony Milton, features editor. We also determine which pitches we want to publish. We get a lot of great pitches, so they're interesting, but they're not written in the narrative format. A lot of the time we would get newsy features, but it doesn't have fleshed-out scenes and characters. So it's picking which pieces we want to publish, it's editing, and it's also communicating with the masthead.

Zofia: What is the best way to teach about narrative journalism?

Rachel: I think that's a great question for Bill, who taught us narrative journalism, but I think I have a decent understanding of it. First of all, you should pick a subject that you're really interested in, one that you're actually passionate about. You're going to be with the subject for a while. You're going to be hunched over your laptop, immersing yourself in the scenes and the lives of your characters. If you're passionate about the subject, it will likely be an interesting story, because if it's interesting to you, it will be interesting to the reader. Then I would just say that observing is a good tool

for a narrative journalist. You have to be really good at picking up on things. You also have to be able to ask some of the tougher questions – you can't really hold back. It is, truly, a deep dive.

Zofia: What do your lessons on literary journalism look like? In Poland, we're mainly focused on reading, and the best part of our classes is always a discussion about previously selected reportage every week.

Rachel: It's funny because that's actually what they look like here too! For the narrative class, we were assigned a reading every week. We would have to do a reading reflection, talk about some of the narrative devices that were used, and what we thought about the piece in general. During class time, there would also be a discussion. For example, one week we would get assigned an entire book, and another week we would get assigned three articles. So, one week we read a profile on Frank Sinatra by Gay Talese, we read one by Joan Didion on Jim Morrison, and then we read one by Lillian Ross on Ernest Hemingway.

I think a big component of that class was that we would have to be interviewing people for our stories as well. We would have to interview around 10 people, and sometimes we would interview them multiple times, so it was practical in that sense, it wasn't just reading. I think reading did help though because we understood more deeply what narrative journalism actually looked like.

Zofia: How to better explore the world of university life? What would you recommend?

Rachel: Just getting involved! I remember people saying this to me, and my undergrad was at a really big university. It was really difficult to put myself out there because it felt like there were so many people. It was scary. You also have to feel really comfortable with people saying "no". I've realized that a lot of people are going to say "no" to you and that's OK. That happens to everyone, you just have to keep going. I think it's just not taking it too seriously and continuously putting yourself out there, and also learning from mistakes and failures. This year, I learned the expression: "fail fast" or "fail hard and fast" because the quicker you fail, the sooner you'll learn from it, and it's true. My advice is to take as many opportunities as you can. If you screw up, make the best out of it and just keep going.

Zofia: Thank you Rachel for this amazing interview. I wish you all the best.

Don't forget to check "The Otter": <https://theotter.ca/>

Biography

Zofia Przybysz – holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and communication from the University of Gdańsk. She's a beginner researcher, mostly dedicated to Polish literary journalism studies, particularly Mariusz Szczygieł's entire body of work. She's interested in the interactive form of non-fiction stories; their affective space and how literary journalism is perceived on social media. She

writes scientific articles covering different aspects of non-fiction books. In her research, she's also focused on spirituality and atheism in literature.

Zofia Przybysz – ukończyła studia licencjackie na Uniwersytecie Gdańskim na kierunku dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna. Jest początkującą naukowczynią zajmującą się polskim reportażem literackim, głównie twórczością Mariusza Szczygła. Interesuje się interaktywnością form non-fiction, ich afektywnością i tym, jak dziennikarstwo literackie jest postrzegane w mediach społecznościowych. Pisze również artykuły naukowe dotyczące różnych aspektów książek non-fiction. W swoich badaniach nad reportażem skupia się także na duchowości i ateizmie w literaturze.

Rachel DeGasperis – is a journalist working for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in Toronto, Canada. In 2023, she graduated from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) with a master's of journalism degree. She also holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Toronto. In 2022, she was co-editor of "The Otter", a long-form narrative online magazine developed by TMU's Journalism Research Centre. Previously, Rachel was the Head of Research for "The Review of Journalism", a Canadian media criticism magazine. In her free time, Rachel is a freelance writer. She spends most of her time listening to podcasts that cover everything from politics to pop culture.

Rachel DeGasperis – jest dziennikarką pracującą dla Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) w Toronto, Kanada. W 2023 roku ukończyła studia magisterskie na Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) na kierunku dziennikarstwo. Studia licencjackie ukończyła na University of Toronto na kierunku political science. W 2022 roku była współredaktorką magazynu „The Otter” stworzonego przez TMU's Journalism Research Centre. Rachel pełniła również funkcję Head of Research dla kanadyjskiego magazynu „The Review of Journalism”. W wolnym czasie zajmuje się pisaniem i spędza większość czasu na słuchaniu podcastów, które dotyczą tematów od polityki po popkulturę.