

The genial Scot at the National Press Club bar in November painted a pleasing picture of *National Enquirer* opulence in the Florida sunshine. Winter enhanced his plausibility. My visions of having to invade Hollywood funeral parlors, sift through mountains of celebrity garbage or track Senator Kennedy to see whether he broke the speed limit on the George Washington Parkway were dispelled: "Mythology," he said. And if there was a touch of the hustler in his broad Glasgow accent, it was belied by the half-moon reading glasses.

Simon Barber, former Washington correspondent for the British newsweekly, NOW!, worked for the *National Enquirer* for five weeks

professional tweeds and Mont Blanc fountain pen.

The *Enquirer's* recruiter found me at a vulnerable moment. My previous employer, a British newsweekly, had folded some months previously; the job hunt was going badly; I was broke. I could scarcely afford to go to the supermarket, much less scorn the drivel on its checkout counters. Sympathy for Carol Burnett, whose suit against the *Enquirer* I once cheered, had become a luxury.

He suggested I try my hand as articles editor. It started at a \$1,000 a week, carried the responsibility of creating and running a network of reporters, and might, in the event of some really spectacular death or disaster, involve a little travel. Hopelessness, and the rakish idea of building a Smiley-esque Circus dedicated to ferreting out the Untold, Amaz-

ing and Bizarre, were ample stimuli. I bit, and three days later I was on a prepaid flight to Florida.

The *Enquirer* resides in Lantana, one of those countless ribs of real estate whose primary function is to separate Palm Beach from Fort Lauderdale and I-95 from the Intracoastal Waterway. A bland tract of telegraph poles, tired palm trees and prefabrication, it is remarkable on two counts: it has a large population of Finns and coruscating soullessness.

In the midst of this refugee camp for the cold and old, wedged between a railway line and a crumbling sports facility, the *National Enquirer* makes its one stab at irony and keeps a low profile. Once the visitor has given up trying to figure out the Minoan-style bull's horns that mark the entrance, he is pleasantly surprised by the landscaping.

The grounds are thick with hibiscus and other fragrant shrubs, each thoughtfully labelled with its botanical name. The building itself lives up to a more squalid expectation. No bastion of multimillion-dollar publishing this, instead a sleepy single-story sprawl that might serviceably house a small electronics factory. Like everything in Lantana, it exudes the grim quality of being *instant*.

It was perhaps my misfortune to be ushered into the presence of executive editor Mike Hoy at lunchtime. The editorial offices were all but empty, and conveyed, in an efficiently pastel way, a sense of innocent cheerfulness, like an outsized kindergarten. Indeed, one of the newsroom cubicles was stacked with exotic toys. I began to suspect that the people who worked here might be having fun.

Hoy, thirtyish, Australian and modelled on the lines of a hygienic rock star, encouraged this view by offering me a job, on a trial basis, within 15 minutes of our meeting, and by explaining why the company would not, as had once been its practice, rent a car for me. One of my more exuberant predecessors had driven an *Enquirer* Hertz into the Waterway.

Then he said something rather strange. "I want you to know that we really are looking for editors." Having been tracked down by a recruiter and flown in from Washington to be interviewed for such a slot, and having just been offered a month's trial at it, I thought this scarcely needed saying. That impermanence was an institution at the *Enquirer* did not occur to me, nor, as yet, did the connection between its desperation for new blood and whatever had possessed the predecessor to sink his car.

Every aspect of the *Enquirer*, from its management to what it prints, is governed by a surgically precise appreciation of human frailty. This is the great achievement of its owner and publisher, the splendidly named Generoso Pope, Jr., and evidently appreciated by six million supermarket purchasers a week. Pope's relationship with his employees approximates that between the God of the Old Testament and the Children of Israel minus forgiveness. His control is total and awe-inspiring, his ways mysterious, his retribution swift. When he deals with a man, he likes, to use his own very secular phrase, to "have him by the balls," and usually succeeds. Under Hoy's guidance, it was hoped I would quickly learn to divine his will.

Known simply as The Boss or GP, Pope dominates the waking thoughts, and more than a few sleeping ones as well, of all at the *Enquirer*. An authorized account, published in 1978 by the *Miami Herald*, describes Pope as "a tall man, built like a Bronx precinct captain." Fifty-four years have softened that image somewhat, except for the face.

said an editor, one of the few women in the *Enquirer's* higher echelons, "There doesn't seem to be anything behind his eyes." The effect is a mask of staring malevolence, which does little to endear.

He is educated. A top of his class graduate in engineering from MIT, according to the authorized account, he served in the CIA's psychological warfare unit. Further glimpses of his life beyond the *Enquirer*, which he purchased in 1952, are virtually nonexistent. His father was the publisher of the New York Italian-language paper *Il Progresso*. Some see murkiness in the fact that since he moved the operation from New Jersey in 1971, Pope has never left south Florida. He says he hates to fly.

There is an eeriness about him enhanced by gun-toting plainclothes security men who haunt the premises, spot checks on reporters' telephone conversations, and the uniformed Lantana patrolman who escorts Pope to and from his car.

My first day should have taught me more, perhaps, than it did. My initial mistake was to turn up in coat and tie. Higher authority wore shirtsleeves and an increasingly familiar pair of pants, a style, admonished Hoy, that I would do well to emulate. I blundered again by trying to strike up a conversation. Apparently one did not talk to colleagues, be they only six feet away, except by internal telephone and with one's back turned. I needed coffee. "Put a top on it," someone hissed as I carried a cup to my desk. "The Boss don't like stains on his carpet." To atone, I worked through lunch, another miscalculation. "The Boss believes in lunch." Next day I ate, grateful for a temporary escape, only to be informed that I'd been seen leaving the office with the wrong people. My companions were said to be under some form of cloud and best avoided. Besides, what was I doing having lunch? I wondered whether Pope ever specified his desires before punishing those who transgressed them.

The arena in which this curious drama was to be played out might have been a newsroom in any large daily before the electronic age. Its open plan layout was symmetrical about a narrow avenue across which two rows of editors, about nine in all, numbers varied, were occasionally polite to one another. Behind them sat their secretaries, each busily pretending to callers that her boss worked in a private office. Next, pinched into lines of narrow, benchlike desks were the 40 or so reporters, each owing allegiance and his job to a particular editor. Finally the writers, who are responsible for the *Enquirer's* deathless prose and probably the happiest employees. Deemed creative by The Boss, they were left in peace. At the end of the central aisle, rather too close to where I had been stationed, was a series of glass cubicles. Pope had a grander sanctum

come when he wished to make his presence felt. Assistants ensured that a pack of Kents and a lighter always awaited his arrival.

As a deracinated Englishman, I should have had some cause to feel at home. A surprising proportion of my new colleagues hailed from Britain and parts of its old empire. A buzz of familiar accents could be heard insinuating charm down various telephones. Having had some success in this department myself, I could imagine the interrogatees being thoroughly disarmed. To their cost.

Pope's predilection for what one American writer has called British Empire Journalism has little to do with the narcotic power of the speech patterns, however, but derives more from their tradition. American reporters tend to take a rather romantic view of their trade, see themselves as somehow in the public service. Their minds are burdened with scruple. Not so the British Empire Journalist. He can report, as in 1978 one imaginative correspondent for the *London Daily Mail* actually did, that President Carter was growing a beard to look more Lincolnesque, and receive a kudogram from his superiors. Rupert Murdoch ranks high in the Pope pantheon, and as publisher of the *Star*, constitutes Pope's most serious opposition.

My first impression was that my fellow editors all looked very ill: exchange their typewriters for oars and they would have made perfect (though, on \$60,000 a year and up, very expensive) extras for the sea battle in *Ben Hur*.

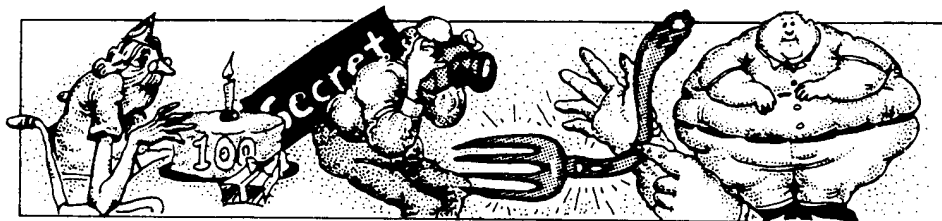
Enquirer reporters had the furtive look of kicked and beaten Labrador Retrievers. Foot soldiers, they were at least insulated from The Boss by their editors, whose paranoia-induced savagery was the price of relative security. The reason I had been brought in from outside to be articles editor was that no reporter wanted to risk his neck or his \$45,000 a year more than was strictly necessary. Now and then one or two were forcibly promoted—given the option of leaving or climbing—which regularly amounted to the same thing: climbers who failed at editor could expect to be fired, and the chances of making it were no better than those of a World War I subaltern on the Western Front.

One of the luckier ones was the young Englishman sitting to my left. Promoted some months previously, he had begun his career on a small provincial paper outside London, and had been lured to Florida by wealth and warmth. In an earlier age, he might have set out to make his fortune in some tropical outpost of Empire. He seemed to be doing all that was required of him: his file drawer was full of good stories in progress, yet there was an air of doom about him. Colleagues shied away, spoke of him with, of all things in this emotional

chapel house, compassion. It turned out he was being executed. *Enquirer*-style.

First they cut his salary, then removed his reporters, forcing him to rely on stringers, finally demanded a massive increase in output. "This is the way Pope always does it," he said one evening towards the end. "They dig you a grave and say climb out if you can. You never can. The grave just gets deeper." Several days later his desk was empty. In this case the editor was allowed to reincarnate himself as a reporter. A rare privilege.

A reason would have been helpful, but my enquiries were about as fruitful



as asking a priest to account plausibly for human suffering. The editor's defrocking could be ascribed to no particular commission or omission, it was just the way things worked around here. A sympathetic reporter noticed my puzzlement. "The Boss is a toy train freak," she explained. "I think he likes to see us as a vast toy train set. He throws switches, sets up obstructions, and races us off bridges just for the hell of seeing what happens."

In terms of how they are put together, there is essentially little difference between the *National Enquirer* and, say, *Time*. To the structuralist, anyway. Leads are developed and assigned, reporters and stringers turn in voluminous files, which are rigorously checked for accuracy, boiled down by writers into the house style, and finally, with luck, printed. There, however, the resemblance ends.

Appearances to the contrary, gung-ho fabulism is not the *Enquirer's* line of business. Nor indeed is journalism, in any of the accepted senses of the word.

Bear in mind that the *Enquirer* is not designed primarily to inform, amuse, or even, really, to be read. It performs these functions, of course, but they are secondary. It exists to be consumed, much in the same way as premixed peanut butter and jelly. The idea is pretty simple. People enter the supermarket in a buying frame of mind, so let's give them one more brightly packaged object to shove into their shopping bags.

The editorial content addresses itself scientifically to the consuming mood, a condition frequently brought on by boredom, restlessness and unfocused dissatisfaction. The universe depicted is a bright, uncomplicated, unambiguous place where things either are (in this category we may include metempsychosis, UFOs and psychic fork-bending) or are not (unhappy endings, celibate celeb-

rities, wise government). The buyer is told that he is basically good, that the rich and famous are basically miserable, and that the quality of life is improving immeasurably: cancer, obesity and arthritis can be cured.

In short the *Enquirer* is a kind of printed Valium, its editors little more than pharmacists, cutting each other's throats to combine and recombine a limited number of ingredients which Pope, the master chemist, has determined will have the desired effect. It is a mechanical and, the financial aspect apart, unrewarding task.

The process begins with the lead.

Each editor is expected to submit 30 or so to The Boss every Friday, of which perhaps half a dozen may be approved. On the rest he scribbles the ubiquitous initials NG (No Good). The ideas come from reporters and stringers (all of whom receive up to \$300 if their offering gets into print), other publications (there is always a race for the new *Omni*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Self*) and the imagination. Memorable specimens from the latter category include "The Junk Food Diet," "How Brooke Shields, Loni Anderson and Farrah Fawcett are Wrecking Your Marriage" and "Let's Get Accredited as a Salvation Army Fundraiser and Go Knocking on Celebrity Doors to See How Generous the Stars Are." A number of celebrity leads are preemptive. I myself proposed "Wedding Bells for Patti Reagan and Peter [Masada] Strauss." The Elizabeth Taylor-John Warner separation was in the works probably before they had even said their vows, and certainly for months before it occurred. At this very moment at least one editor is contemplating marriage between Robert Wagner, widower of Natalie Wood, and his television co-star Stephanie Powers.

Often, of course, celebrities do dramatic things that even the *Enquirer* cannot foresee, the deaths of Natalie Wood and William Holden for example. In these instances, leads are rushed through under the rubric of "Untold Story," the logic being that there will always be one. In the Wood case, which occurred a few weeks after I arrived, the editor involved went to extraordinary lengths to find something that the voluble Los Angeles coroner Thomas Noguchi had not said. What he came up with was the suggestion, ascribed to Top Doctors, that the actress, rather than drowning, had been asphyxiated by a potent mixture of drugs and alcohol. This on the basis of a well-stocked medicine cabinet and the

alleged absence of froth on the victim's lips. What I heard of the interviews went as follows: "Doctor, if after consuming such and such a quantity of alcohol, a person were to take drugs x and y, what would be the result?"

Even the most grizzled veteran cannot second guess Pope's taste with any certainty. His notions of what constitutes a contemporary star are quixotic, but seem to derive from movies of the '50s and '60s (hence Sophia Loren, Princess Grace and, by association, her daughter Caroline) and the top ten Nielson-rated shows he happens to watch (not *60 Minutes*). Dudley Moore, of *10* and *Arthur* fame, fails to register on the grounds that he is, and I quote, "Not big enough." The currently lionized Tom Selleck (*Magnum, PI*), did not have the right stuff either, until Pope was persuaded to poll his favorite gauges of gut reaction, the secretaries.

There are, however, some totally predictable NG's, chief among them blacks, except when they practice voodoo, or are child comic Gary Coleman. I presented Hoy with a heart-warming story of a young New Orleans man who had survived a grain elevator explosion and 80 percent burns to become a multi-millionaire (a surefire hit under the Rags to Riches category). He immediately asked me what color he was. Black. Kill it. Gays, on the other hand, may be beaten up at will. An outraged account of San Francisco's demographics was headlined "Sick! Sick! Sick!" The *Enquirer*, a self-styled Equal Opportunity Employer, has no minority employees.

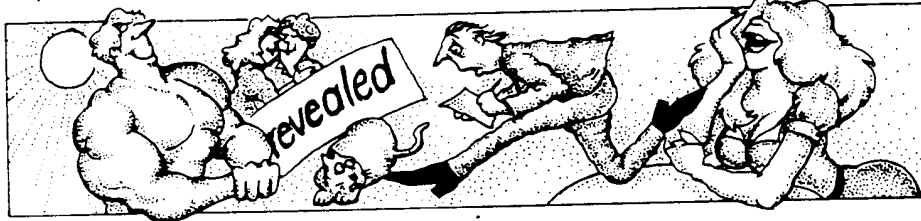
Once an approved lead has pleased Story Control, a computer programmed to weed out duplicates, it is ready to be reported, and the ethical mayhem begins.

If celebrities are the potatoes of tabloid journalism, miraculous medicine is the meat. Unfortunately, the medical fraternity likes to be circumspect about describing its advances, and talks of percentages, hopes, possibilities, rarely of anything so definite as a cure. This is too gray for the *Enquirer* which does not recognize the subjunctive mood: a thing either is or it isn't. The trick, therefore, is to get the medical man, who in his right mind would never even talk to the *Enquirer*, to say things that would cost him his shingle if he tried to say them in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and on tape. This is known in the trade as Burning Docs.

Technically, the reporter's path is strewn with regulations. Not only must his interviews be taped, but he has signed a waiver binding him to identify himself as working for the *Enquirer* and as using a recorder, thus excusing his employers when, as he must, he sidles past the law. If his editor wants him to get a doctor to say something, he is under considerably more pressure to pro-

duce than to be an upright citizen. refusal to carry out an order is treated with military firmness.

There are many ways to ease on-the-record indiscretion from an interviewee, the most popular being the old 20 Questions ploy. The subject is stroked into a state of trust and then hit with a series of convoluted queries, to which he will answer, if the reporter is adroit enough, merely yes or no. These little words can be made to speak volumes. Critical readers may wonder how it is that supposedly sophisticated professionals, when quoted in the *Enquirer*, always manage to clutter their



remarks with an effusion of amazings, incredibles and fantastics.

This method is openly encouraged by Pope. In a memo distributed to all newcomers he commands bluntly: "Ask leading questions." Lest it be carried too far, reporters are then reminded, "Quotes should not only be appropriate but believable. A Japanese carpenter should not sound like Ernest Hemingway, or vice versa."

Add to this Pope's rather confining taste in vocabulary, and the results can be bizarre. Reporter Byron Lutz had worked hard to produce "The Biggest Swindle in U.S. History," a tale of a computer rip-off within the federal government. He had even persuaded a Justice Department official to agree that it was indeed "the biggest swindle," a questionable assertion by itself. Enter the Evaluator, a character whose task it is to condense finished files into single paragraphs for the benefit of Pope and the writers.

Evaluator: "This won't get through, Lutz. We don't use swindle."

Lutz: "But that's what the guy at the Justice Department called it, it's on the tape."

Eval.: "It's got to be robbery."

Lutz: "But there's a difference."

Editor (intervening): "He's right. Let's look it up in the dictionary."

Eval.: "Hey, I don't care. The Boss don't like swindle make it robbery."

Editor (snapping to what looked suspiciously like attention): "Get on it, Lutz, get your guy to say robbery. Now."

At least doctors and officials can be made to speak. Celebrities are less obliging with their reputations. To reveal the supposed drama of their lives the reporter must resort to an altogether higher order of guile. In compensation, he is required to offer less in the way of proof. Stars are public property, and

Amendment.

Much of the information on who is bedding whom, whose career is on the skids and who is currently being detoxified from what, emanates from the thriving gossip industry as a whole. I do not pretend to know how this works. Obviously, however, the *Enquirer* has to delve deeper to satisfy what the commercials call its readers' "Enquiring Minds."

What makes the reporter's mission particularly tough is that he is often covering not a set of circumstances his editor knows or believes to exist, but one that the editor *wishes* to have happen. A

new TV series has emerged, perhaps, and The Boss wants an exciting story about its participants. Or an editor may conclude that there has been too striking an absence of Farrah Fawcett. A reconciliation with Lee Majors is needed to fill the gap. Thanks to a large array of "insiders," "friends" and "intimate sources," many of whom are in the *Enquirer's* pay, such things can be arranged.

In some cases, a great deal of old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting does go on, though it has been known to get out of hand. The coffin photographs of Elvis Presley are not an isolated phenomenon. One reporter told me that while-tracking the hometown life of a currently popular television actress, he stumbled onto the fact that that she had had an abortion. Such was the pressure he was under, he lined up a neighborhood hoodlum to steal the records. Getting mixed signals from his editor, he thought better of it.

Celebrity romance stories are frequently the work of reporters whose main activity is to hang around fashionable watering holes. Maitre d's and waiters are also retained. Thus, the *Enquirer* often has a pair of eyes in place when an interesting couple appear in public for the first time, or have a violent quarrel.

Hollywood sex, in the *Enquirer*, is a formulaic affair. The starting assumption is that any physical contact represents romance. At the lower end of the scale, hand holding is described by "insiders," who do not have to be told the *Enquirer* style, as "they looked like a pair of teenagers in love." Any kiss less demure than a peck is evidence that the relationship has turned "hot and heavy."

Equally earnest is the *Enquirer's* attitude towards the paranormal. Cranks are not tolerated, and anyone claiming to have been reborn, sighted UFOs or communicated with the beyond is subjected

considered sounder evidence than a lie detector because the latter has the unfortunate habit of being accurate.

The reigning exponent of what may be called the "Hey-Martha-Will-You-Get-A-Look-At-This" school is *Enquirer* superstringer Henry Gris, a former UPI correspondent. His latest find is one "Dr. Victor Azhazha," eminent Soviet scientist. Dr. Azhazha claimed, and there is an artist's conception complete with silhouetted Kremlin to back it up, that a mysterious shining cloud had drifted over Moscow one night causing great consternation. A friend of mine, stationed in Moscow for a well-known British daily, commented, "I didn't see this cloud, which was perhaps careless. It might have started World War III."

A cardinal rule of the information trade is that the more bald and unconvincing a story, the greater the machinery needed to lend it verisimilitude. The *Enquirer* is inordinately proud of its Research Department. A copy of a glowing account in *Editor & Publisher* that appeared in 1978 is compulsory reading for all arrivals.

E&P tells us that Research is staffed by probing professionals, headed by Ruth Annan, a 16-year veteran of *Time*. Her team includes "two medical specialists, two lawyers, a linguist who speaks four languages, a geographer, three with master's degrees in library science, one with a master's degree in educational psychology, and an author."

And yet it regularly lets through palpable inanities. The concept of a "4,000-year-old Stone Age statuette" does not bother it, for example, but this is a quibble. Most of what escapes the tireless fact-checkers is on a grander scale, even in cases where the facts can actually be checked.

Researchers are cunningly paid less than reporters whose work they scrutinize, and thus approach their task with the enthusiasm of inquisitors. That the *Enquirer* is published at all is not their fault.

I have no doubt that Research pursues Truth with genuine vigor, but it is hampered by one major defect: literal-mindedness. If the tapes and copy jibe, and sources when contacted agree to what has been reported, the story must, however reluctantly, be granted the imprimatur of accuracy.

One disadvantage of Annan and her staff is that they clog up an already hopelessly slow system—lead time is usually three or four weeks—with haggling that, given the nature of the beast, is utterly unnecessary. On the upside, however, their mere existence enables reporters to tell a suspicious world that, yes, really, the *Enquirer* does strive after fact. As editor Paul Levy told *E&P*, "Today any reporter can say with justifiable pride that he works for the most accurate paper in the country."