

THE NOVELIST'S EVENT

by James Reston, Jr.

For nearly ten days, I spend most of my time in the great, open-air atrium of the Park Hotel in Georgetown, Guyana, listening to the sensitive interviewing of perplexed newsmen. The survivors of the madman are a bedraggled lot: some resisters, others there only by the accident of life. They had business in Georgetown that day, when, a week earlier, the devil had made his prodigious, diabolical proposal in Jonestown. The luck of a properly timed dentist appointment. Some, I would later hear, considered it misfortune rather than luck. Their stories of barbarism in the jungle, the return to bestiality akin to Conrad's Kurtz, are what have drawn me here, leaping first at this authentic horror from literary impulse. It is a fascinating saga, perhaps the most fascinating of our time. Yet it is so loathsome. One hundred and fifty miles away, the American Army proceeds with its janitorial mission. Never before have I worked for so long on the edge of nausea.

Late this afternoon, I stand on the fringe of a cluster surrounding one Michael Prokes. He has the clean, weak face of everyman California, his voice the flat, common tone of the Fresno Valley. Former television newsmen, Jones's press spokesman for several years, courier at the end for the wades of the Temple's millions, stuffed into ammunition pouches and dime-store suitcases....along with the letters of transfer to the Soviet Embassy. He talks matter-of-factly to his bewildered audience. It might be the uneventful noon day briefing. Where? The Federal Trade Commission or the like. No hot wind of holocaust here. I view him as the Goebbels of the piece.

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At length, Prokes discourses on the caring of Jim Jones, the blissful sharing of the loving community, grand experiment that it had been. I can take it no longer.

But what was Jones like that Saturday morning? Hadn't he changed? What had so upset him? I ask.

Jones was no different, came the answer.

"Hadn't he exploded over the crisis of Ryan's visit?"

"Oh no, Jim was always at his best in crisis."

"Look, Mr. Prokes, 900 people are dead out there, and you're saying there was no crisis that morning." My tone is sharp, the desperate frustration rising to the surface. "That makes no sense whatever."

He stares at me for a long moment, stunned. He is accustomed now to his listeners nodding dumbfoundedly at his vacancy. I have gone too far. I know it instantly. I am the author. I will be two more years on this story before I am finished. Why am I contributing to this madness, instead of simply absorbing it? What point is there in grilling the witness now? My own sanity simply.

"I don't have to take that," he snaps, rising to the further shock and disappointment of the sensitive newsmen, still full of a thousand questions. "I've tried to be cooperative. I've been answering questions now for six straight days. Look, I've got a son dead out there. I don't have to stand for your browbeating." A son? He is a faggot, I learn later, the son another of Jones's offspring, for whom Prokes becomes the eunuch-custodian. He stomps off. Newsmen turn angered stares on me. Four months later, Prokes will call a news conference in Modesto, California, read a five page statement, putting out the same old stuff: Jim Jones was Goodness incarnate, a great government conspiracy was poised to destroy his Utopia. He is

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determined that the deaths of his comrades will not be in vain. He even quotes Patrick Henry again. Politely, he will excuse himself, go to the Men's Room, and put a bullet in his brain. I will hear about it at four in the morning from a Modesto newsman, whom I had plying with a series of questions to ask Prokes at his "news conference." When the phone rings, I hope that it brings the answers.

In the beginning, literary images pack my head. Perhaps it is my guilt for having laid aside a novel to take on this authentic horror. Jones as Kurtz, Prokes as Goebbels, the Park Hotel with its spaciousness, its banana fronds fanned by the trade winds, its immaculate deferential Indian waiters plying me constantly with Banks beer, making me feel as if I am an officer in the Queen's Hussar's: surely this was Graham Greene's hotel in the Comedians. Or didn't my Jones/Kurtz figure have a touch of 'Mr. Todd.' After all, Evelyn Waugh had traveled here in 1933, finding inspiration in his three month safari through the Guyanese wilderness for "The Man Who Liked Dickens," then the ending for Handful of Dust. Mr. Todd, that brutal, unfair character discoursing to his captive on the jungle.

There is medicine for everything in the forest: to make you well and to make you ill. My mother was an Indian, and she taught me many of them. I have learned others from time to time from my wives. There are plants to cure you, and to give you fever, to kill you and to send you mad; to keep away snakes, to intoxicate fish, so you can pick them out of the water with your hands like fruit from a tree. There are medicines even I do not know. They say it is possible to bring dead people to life after they have begun to stink, but I have not seen it done.

Mr. Todd....dooming his captive to read Dickens aloud forever in the heat and the gloom of the forest. I loved the novel, hated the ending.

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But what of D.H. Lawrence's leadership novels, especially Kangaroo: their themes of the God-like leader, the desperate longing of the characters to be carried away, transported into a blissful, insect-like dependence.

Somers sat rather stupefied than convinced. But he found himself wanting to be convinced, wanting to be carried away. The desire hankered in his heart. Kangaroo had become beautiful again: huge and beautiful like some god that sways and seems clumsy, then suddenly flashes with all the agility of thunder and lightening. Huge and beautiful as he sat hulked in his chair. Somers did wish he would get up again and carry him quite away.

But where to? Where to? Where is one carried to when one is carried away? He had a bitter mistrust of seventh heavens and all heavens in general. But then the experience. If Kangaroo had got up at that moment, Somers would have given him heart and soul and body for the asking and damn all consequences. He longed to do it. He knew that by just going over and laying a hand on the great figure of the sullen god, he could achieve it. Kangaroo would leap like a thunder-cloud and catch him up---catch him up and away into a transport. A transport that should last for life. He knew it.

I am getting confused with these images. I listen on the veranda for that moral confusion and do not hear it.

Several days after my altercation with Mr. Prokes, I am back in my chair at the Park Hotel. A Time Magazine reporter, with whom I am friendly, appears before me ashen-faced, gesturing dramatically for me to follow him back through the labyrinthine, curry-reeking corridors to his room. There, he directs me to a chair. After a heavily weighted pause, he announces that he is leaving, leaving right away. He advises me to do the same. He knows the full story of Jonestown, he declares with a nervous gesture. He will not tell his editors he knows it. He will not write it.

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He is getting out of Guyana fast, before....before, his silences seem to say, he goes mad. For five hours, he has listened to the account of an old, Indian stringer for Time in Georgetown, (named Paul Persaud.) The old man knew the outer perimeters of the entire horror. As the reporter had listened, he felt the horror start in his toes and slowly ascend through his body. He would not write it, but he had given the stringer my name.

"You will write the definitive book on this subject," he says. "I have given Mr. Persaud your name. He will contact you at your hotel in a few days. Frankly, Jim, I advise you not to see him. If I were you, I would not write this book. It will make you the most celebrated writer in America....and you will die for it."

A nervous laugh wells in my belly, but I suppress it. It is as if I have read the line before in a bad novel, or heard it delivered with this same, theatrical look in a B movie. Am I becoming a character in this story? My purpose here is literature. How can I deal with a line like that? Bad fiction, terrifying reality. Where am I? For days, the air has been filled with rumors of a Jim Jones 'hit squad.' Are they imaginative projections? The rumors are always couched in such Biblical terms: a band of wrathful angels who in due course will swoop down upon the enemies of the sullen leader, including hostile writers, and deliver Father's vengeance upon them.

The horror lies in this frightening brew-mix of death, secrecy, divine representation. The murders out there are committed as much by the phantoms of Jones's imaginative description, as by the visit of that fatuous congressman from California, Leo Ryan. The phantoms lurk just past the perimeter, just out of sight in the darkness. Later, I will

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not be able to wash out of my mind Jones's howls into the wilderness: "They're out there. They're out there everynight," he screams. "We'll kill you if you come in." The horror lies in how the story works on the mind---the fear follows logically. I begin to take down the name of Paul Persaud, the Time stringer possessed of such glamorous, viral knowledge. The reporter stops me. No, put the name on the inside of your pad, he commands, and don't put my name beside it. Late that night, he will be safely out of Guyana, settled in a luxury hotel high above a corral bay in Barbados. He will push a desk over to the sliding glass doors, which usher out onto his high patio. The angels will not enter his room without a mover's strength.

For several days, I wait for a note from the mysterious Mr. Persaud, and I make a few inquiries about him. He fancies himself "the pundit" of Georgetown, I learn. He writes occasional puff pieces in the government's organ, the Guyana Chronicle, about the dictator of the country, Forbes Burnham. And he writes a humor column under a pseudonym. The column turns out to be a collection of tired, off-color cracks like "The respectable husband never finds pleasure in cheating on his wife. But since he is respectable, who else can he cheat!" or "No wonder Solomon was the world's wisest man. He had more than 300 wives to advise him."

As I wait for Persaud's summons in my room at the Tower Hotel, down the street of flamboyance trees from the Park Hotel, I make the mistake of reading. More literary images invade my head. Two seem to crowd the others out. Both are from the Comedians. One is the character of Petite Pierre, the unctuous, depraved emissary of Papa Doc, posing as a journalist,

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always the bearer of bad news as he meanders up the road to that wonderful, near empty hotel. The mere sight of Petit Pierre frightens the novel's protagonist. Is Paul Persaud Petite Pierre? The second image is Greene's hotel itself, not too different, I imagine, from the Tower. For the Tower's rooms open too onto palm-appointed patios by the side of a luxurious pool. A lovely azure tile mosaic surrounds the pool outside my room. A gigantic palm at the far side sways gently, domineeringly, in the torrid breeze at midday. I remember the offhand remark of my doctor back in North Carolina, before I left on this journey. Swim frequently, he advised. It has a wonderful calming effect on the soul. The words tumbled out, as he put away the syringe of gamma globulin to combat God knows what and handed me pills for everything: dysentery, diaherra, anxiety, depression. But as I wait for Persaud's call, the image ^{from} the Comedians is of an intellectual floating face down in a hotel pool. It dampens my enthusiasm for swimming.

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Why do I relate all this now, three years later? Simply this: the literary sensibility can be as much a hindrance as a help, especially if one is drawn with a novelist's honing to authentic stories of horror, danger, and mystery. The instinct of the writer should always be to enter deeply into his material, to live it, feel it, know every aspect of his characters' personality, so as to understand why they do what they do. But what if that very immersion can be soul-withering, and eventually paralyzing? What of the writer's distance, and his ability to judge? To enter in deeply and to maintain distance: is that a contradiction? Is that possible in an authentic horror story?

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Yes, I say now, but it is not easy. For me, eight months were required, before I was able to treat Jonestown as just "my current book." Partly, the difficulty of getting the material I needed to make a worthy book plagued me. The government had 971 tapes of Jim Jones's nightly sermons in the jungle. That was the crucial repository. In them lay the jungle story I was after, for I had ruled out early a reliance on the skewed accounts of the few survivors who had no comprehension of what had overwhelmed them. "With those tapes, I reasoned, I could go beyond Conrad, for the great Pole had only suggested the heart of darkness; he had not described it. One saw Kurtz only at his end on his death plank, not in his prime as he was worshiped by his savages in the state of nature. If the Jim Jones recordings were what I suspected, I could bring alive Jones's gradual descent into barbarism in the wilderness. That, I was sure, could make a contribution that would survive.

But the government's resistance to my repeated requests was only part of a wider anxiety.

Early on, I had made the mistake of reading a Stephen Spender review of a holocaust book, Nelly Sach's O the Chimneys. Spender saw the awfulness of our century in the worst Dostoyevskian fantasies come true: genocide, concentration camps, world wars, mass murder. Mass suicide was not yet in the litany. How was the writer to relate his own experience to "the immense circumference of contemporary violence and suffering?" How was he to enter into "the destructive element" of modern life?

"Most writers gaze at the furnace through a fire-proofed window in a thick wall," Spender wrote. "Necessarily so, because they have to preserve the conditions in which their sensibility can act without being destroyed by it."

Spender is wrong, I think now. True, most writers view modern horror from a distance---as much to write about it quickly and make money by being FIRST as anything else. (That instinct, encouraged by publishers as much as writers, lead to the ^{book-length} slapdash pornography that Jonestown spawned early on.) But there is no inevitability about being maimed by the experience. Still, this Spenderian nightmare nearly paralysed me for half a year. Was my gentle sensibility headed inexorably for an ugly, mean, twisted caricature of its old self? By going to Guyana immediately, by entering into the madness of Georgetown so totally, had I allowed that firewall of Spender's to become too thin? Was I permanently scarred? It was not until William Styron, who himself had dealt with the holocaust for five years in making Sophie's Choice told me, "It's your job. It's one of the most irresistible stories of all time. You can do it well," that I dropped all this highfalutin baggage about becoming emotionally maimed and got on with it. But to have lived the horror and madness, to have been smitten constantly by nausea, even to have worried for a good long while about Spender's warning, probably improved the product. But it had to end.

Out of this process emerges for me the concept of the novelist's event. Such occurrences happen rarely in the real world. They are so unusual, often so incomprehensible, sometimes horrifying and mysterious, and have elements of adventure, intrigue, and poetry. As such, they lend themselves uniquely to the storyteller's art. These events are beyond the journalist's short attention span, and beyond the cold, dispassionate touch of the historian. Novelist's events which have always appealed to me suggest something important, maybe even profound about contemporary society or modern man. Bizarre as they may be, they

provide a special window into truth. In treating them properly, the novelist's instincts are on display from the outset, first by entering into the story utterly, absolutely, thoroughly, coming to know it not just factually but emotionally, then in conceptualizing the form, reducing the cast characters (especially if it is a thousand) to a comprehensible number, developing the chosen few richly, bringing them alive, finally in choosing and arranging scenes, without departing from the record, so their very arrangement will have the rising tension and satisfying climax of the novel.

Jonestown is the greatest novelist's event of our time. As a story, it far surpasses the murders, the executions, the Vietnam protests of Capote and Mailer. In Jonestown, the main character was no common criminal, but a consummate villain of history, who had committed a gigantic crime against humanity. The full evil of his character and his method had to be uncovered and displayed. There were the followers, who loved and hated him, yet strangely followed him to his apocalypse. Did stupidity or mind control really explain their actions? Clearly not. So the novelist's reach must go beyond that of the psychologist as well. There was the exotic setting of broken-down, elemental Guyana and the overpowering jungle, always an alluring metaphor, which made the place a perfect laboratory for tyranny....and an ideal place to search for Eden. And the overwhelming end. The journalists could only report the squalid spectacle after death, and did so in excessive, lurid detail, as the dead awaited their military morticians. The story cried out for careful reconstruction of what lead up to the end. How did he do it? How could one human being so control 900? What was American about the event? The tapes. The tapes.

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Instead, publishers rushed out their seven day wonders. Six months later came the regurgitation of the journalism, packaged whole. Hollywood followed with its "docu-drama," scripted by the creator of "The French Connection," a product based on a seven day wonder : tawdry, hyped up, false movie-making validated by slapdash literature, taking 51% of the share in the Nielson ratings. Together, print and film created strong and lasting images, wrong-headed and vapid though they were, which quickly were accepted as the way it was. Jones was sex-crazed and power-mad, a drug addict and rip-off artist, a meglomaniac presiding over a passel of wind-up robots, a good man who had turned evil at some magical moment. Is it really so easy for such a monster to amass a following of 20,000 in four years in modern America? Is it really so easy for such a twisted aberration to dupe top leaders from California to Washington, Guyana to Moscow? If so, what a world this must be. This sort of thing should be happening everyday, because clearly there's money in meglomania. Between paperback books and Hollywood, the magnificence of the complicated and true version of the Jim Jones story, was nearly ruined by the banal simplifiers, not only as a story, but for its profound importance to all of us. The novelist's event was nearly ruined by the movie event. The possibility for art was almost ruined by the reality of fast shloach. Perhaps I should not complain. If one is to choose stories, novelist's events or not, which have "entertainment features," he should accept the risks.

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By calling In Cold Blood a "non-fiction novel," Truman Capote began a literary competition in the mid-Sixties over the artistic potential of book-length journalism. Tom Wolfe pushed along and certified the sweepstakes in 1972 with his fine essay in Esquire Magazine entitled "Why they aren't writing the great American novel anymore," in which he argued that the "upper class" of the literary ranks, the novelists, had abandoned the realm of pure imagination for the reality of an interesting age, largely because the age itself was bigger than life. The debate continues today, if in a somewhat ossified mode. In the beginning, the debate was a dialogue between Capote and Norman Mailer, the latter having followed with Armies in the Night, trying to force "non-fiction novel" aside with his own label, "novel as history, history as novel." Capote prevailed in the early round. Now Mailer has tried again with another label, "true life novel," applying it to his Garry Gilmore book, Executioner's Song.

This kind of energetic competition between writers makes the literary world go round, and I wish there were more of it. (The Pulitzer Prize Committee, however, did no one but Mailer a favor by conferring its prize for fiction on Executioner's Song. The committee took too seriously Mailer's term of art for a book he contended was 99% accurate fact, and the prize undermined the essential quality of the novel as a work of imagination.) It is a tribute to Capote and Mailer as personalities that their work, fine as it can be, has so dominated this subject of the "artistic possibilities of fact." But these men are not, by a long shot, the only novelists working the factual terrain.

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No matter what one chooses to call it: non-fiction novel, true life novel, novel as history/history as novel, or even "Novel in reality" as I call my Jim Jones work, the finest exercise of the novelist's sensibility on a real event remains John Hersey's Hiroshima. With a brilliant and simple novelist's conception (inspired by Thornton Wilder's structure in Bridge over San Luis Rey), Hersey reduced the incomprehensible to the human, dramatized the overwhelming horror of nuclear holocaust by showing its effect on a few. It reads like a novel, even a classic novel. One cares about the characters---they are victims, rather than Capote's or Mailer's villains. And one comes away with an understanding of an event so central now to the human condition. In the day of the MX and the nuclear bullet, Hiroshima endures not only as splendid literature, but as a lasting reminder.

Hersey applied to an event a technique which Virginia Woolff had applied to biography. The great biographer, Woolff wrote in her essay, "The Art of Biography," is on a search not for all facts of a subject's life, but "the creative fact," "the fertile fact" by which she meant facts which reveal and nurture character. This standard can, as Hersey showed, go to the character of an event as well. What are the creative or fertile facts which suggest the true character of a holocaust? The novelist's instinct, especially at work on cataclysmic tragedy, is always to humanize, where the historian's instinct normally depersonalizes, or the psycho-historian medicalizes. This very selectivity gives Hiroshima its success as high art, where the vacuum cleaner quality of Executioner's Song puts it in a lower category.

When Capote and Mailer and Hersey publish factual books now, the

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critical community in America braces itself for an artistic event and is either satisfied or disappointed. But as much talk as these writers have generated on fact as art, their contribution has not charted out a field upon which others can play. Generally speaking, critics still discuss how richly or interestingly characters are rendered only in reviews of a novel. Only in the novel is literary construction, the arrangement of fact for dramatic purpose, a major topic for discussion. Only in the novel are the bizarre or the fantastic really considered acceptable subjects. When events with a novel-like feel are treated in non-fiction, books are often considered sleazy or sensational or God help us all, commercial. Only in the novel is there ever much talk about the emotional intensity of the author.

For those outside the literary establishment, who have been influenced and excited by the artistic possibilities of factual writing, there remains a critical lag. Twice now, I have experienced it, first in my 1977 book, The Innocence of Joan Little, now with Our Father Who Art in Hell. With the Joan Little story, there were magnificent novel-like elements: the simple, mysterious killing of a white jailer by a young black woman in a small town southern jail, which gave rise to worldwide interest. The saga had a celebrated, fascinating trial, which presented in one bundle profound questions about capital punishment, rights of prisoners, women's right to kill a sexual attacker, civil rights and the nature of the much idealized "New South of Jimmy Carter." Just as important, it had an irresistible cast of characters.

Such rare novelist's events are even rarer when they happen in one's own backyard. So I rushed to do a magazine article about the case, and

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subsequently attended the boisterous, wild six week trial in Raleigh, N.C. knowing all the time that a book would follow. It was a story I wanted to tell, but how to tell it? As much thought went into that, as into the gathering of fact. For years, I had been intrigued by the pacing of Wilkie Collins's marvelous 19th Century mystery, The Moonstone. The tale of a missing gem, the novel races through more than 600 pages, never slackening in tension, as the journey of the gem is told through the narratives of those who catch glimpses of it along the way, starting with the butler who discovers it missing. Collins's intention, apart from the main purpose of holding the reader, was to show the relationship between character and circumstance. "The attempt made here is to trace the influence of character on events," he wrote in the preface to the first edition in 1868. "The (characters') course of thought and action under the circumstances which surround them, is shown to be sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Right or wrong, their conduct, in either event, equally directs the course of those portions of the story in which they are concerned." The way in which events are seen, in other words, affects future action. If individual perception has such a profound influence on events, how can there be objective truth?

It's one thing to base a novel on such a notion, but would it hold up in an authentic story? The Joan Little extravaganza was the perfect event to test Collins's literary theory: it had mystery; it had fascinating characters on both sides of the issue; the courtroom verdict of not guilty had not really answered the essential questions. She was deemed innocent simply because the State had not been able to prove its case. Had she lured the fat, old jailer into that cell with the intent to kill the wretch and escape? Or had the gross, old pervert taken the

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icepick into the cell to force his attentions on the innocent lass? For starters, the characters had been central to the manner in which the case unfolded into an international cause celebre. With blander protagonists, with a less colorful setting (outside the South), with a more rational charge (like second degree murder instead of murder one), Little would have been just another number, just another convict, certainly not the uncertain heroine of a novelist's event.

My Collins-inspired concept evolved gradually. I would make a different character in the drama the central figure of an entire chapter and have that figure narrate that portion of the drama in which he or she was most intimately connected. The prejudices and passions of each character would infuse each narrative. The contrasts would be glaring. It was as if the antagonists were viewing two entirely different events. Taken together, the effect I sought would be three-fold: to show the difficulty that passion and prejudice presents to "objective truth"; richly to render a comprehensible cast of characters as any novelist would want in a novel; to turn the reader into a "superjuror," judging for himself the "innocence" or guilt of Joan Little. Innocence was treated ironically, meant to apply not just the narrow legal construction, but the broader human dimension of the word. If one viewed her as an earthly, soiled, and violent person, it was harder to think of her as "innocent" of the crime, with which she was charged. If one viewed her as a victim of circumstances, it was easier.

Except in North Carolina, where the legal spectacle had become the state's humiliation before the nation, the book was well-received when it appeared in 1977. But I can safely say that not a single review addressed the literary construction of the book. The fourteen narratives became Reston's fourteen "interviews," even though I had made clear the fact that

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that hours upon hours of raw interviews from which the narratives had been carefully fashioned had been deposited with the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. I had thrown in "gobs" of undigested material of God-knows-what, one review complained. Another was shocked that lies had infused several narratives, which later contrasted to truths expressed by another character. Another reviewer was disappointed not to have found the "seminal interview" with Joan Little which would reveal whether or not she had lured the jailer in. Another could not understand why so much down-home dialogue had been included. There were the silly complaints, but even in the praise, no where was there serious treatment of how the story was told, and why it was told that way, and whether in the end, that technique worked, dare I say it?, artistically.

Were I to begin again my "southern mystery" as I called that one, I would approach the story no differently. Perhaps I would give it a different title, because Innocence was generally interpreted as legal innocence, as if to suggest that this was a tract proving a legal case, and never accorded the wider ironic quality I intended. I had wanted to test the Wilkie Collins scheme, and it had worked to my satisfaction. But the great emphasis in the critical reaction on "what is new", and its manner of disregarding literary construction (unless you are in the Hersey-Mailer-Capote axis), made an impact upon me. Next time, I determined to be sure to feed the critics' gigantic appetite for the new and the startling.

Jonestown happened and I leapt. After the journalism, there was only one "new" thing to uncover, and it was everything. The fast books came, then the rehashes, then the movie, as I manfully fought for the tapes.

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Fourteen months after the event, I got them through the good offices of then Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti. It was the breakthrough. I sweated with worry that, like a Guyanese carrion crow, someone would descend upon my material. The tapes were beyond belief, the moral equivalent of Hitler's conversations in the Bunker, the howl of barbarism in the jungle. They validated Joseph Conrad and went beyond him. For months, I listened desperately trying to keep myself alert for the "creative" or "fertile" interchanges, which contained the universal. It was not an easy job. There was so much dreck, so much repetition, but beneath it, the most perfectly constructed tyranny in American history. It was easy to become benumbed. Finally, I finished.

The lions took over, and ~~last~~ winter, their first complaints came. Of course, Weston's book would be well-written, maybe even artistic (how the clerks of publishing can say that with contempt!), and yes, wasn't it wonderful that these tapes had finally been broken out. But the subject was, in a word, EXHAUSTED! I ignored it. Hitler was laughing. Evil endures. What did salesmen know?

Then came two excerpts of the book, one in the ^(distinguished,) literary journal, The Carolina Quarterly, the other in Penthouse. How close sometimes the line can be between the literary and the prurient! Every novelist knows that. Penthouse splashed its point headline across the sweaty brow of a woman in the afterglow of copulation: EXCLUSIVE TAPES: The last moments of Jonestown. I could not complain. The mountain of "new stuff" was getting its due. Penthouse set the tone. All I began to hear was tapes. It was as if I had put out another Watergate digest. I was peeping in on Jones, the way we all had on Nixon. The ghosts of Mailer and Capote cackled from their corner in my study. Everytime I read of tapes in a review, it

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sounded more patronizing. A New York Times review of another Jonestown book stated that with Reston's comprehensive picture of Jones, not a single new fact can be added to this story, so our attention should turn to analysis. The reviews of the early books had complained that we knew only the pornography of Jonestown, now we knew too much. Another review complained that Reston's points of analysis got in the way and slowed down the story.

Perhaps I had finally achieved the distance I had always admired in the older pros: the critics who are right tell you what you know already; those who are wrong are irrelevant.

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Three days go by without a summons from Paul Persaud. At length, I dig in my notes, written in my scrawl and rudimentary code to protect the Time reporter who got me into this. I find it: 100 Carmichael St. Not far from the Tower Hotel. I walk past the presidential palace, a white colonial house with green shutters, Demerara shutters as they are called, which angle out from the window top, so that the air can still circulate when the torrential downpours come. The President is of Chinese extraction, one more curious fact about this curious country of Indians and blacks, but he is a figure head. The guard in the kiosk is the only spit and polish military man I will observe in the country.

At number 100, there is a gate outside a well maintained three story house, and I hear the distant sound of a radio newscast, Radio Trinidad, as I struggle with the latch. A high pitched voice calls out to me by name.

"Come in, Jim," the voice says from somewhere in the basement. "I have been expecting you." Uncertainly, I peer around windows, trying to locate

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the source. "Here, in the basement," the voice helps.

I enter a dank, but bright enough basement office, smelling of old newspapers and Indian incense. There, seated behind an English table, sheets of paper before him, filled with lines of orotund script, a fat fountain pen in his hand, is the oddest looking man I have ever seen. It flashes across my mind that he looks different from the Petit Pierre of my imagination and realize almost as quickly that Hollywood has implanted yet another strong image in me: the suave, unctuous aspect of Petit Pierre of Hollywood's Comedians, with Elizabeth Taylor top billing. A traditional white shirt hanging loosely about him, I guess he weighs no more than a hundred pounds. Lively, amused eyes peer out at me through thick, narrow glasses from his angular, East Indian face. A great mop of black hair doffs the top of his head, as if his barber had placed a bowl upon his head, cutting closely around the ears, and reaching for the look, not so much of a friar, as a man with a wig (slightly askew.) Long strands of unmanageable curls trundle down from the precipice, and narrow long fingers constantly push these strands back up where they belong.

"There's been a car crash in the Corentyne today, and eight East Indians were killed," he announces languidly. "The Indian press will want to know about that. But I'm a lazy reporter. I'll file it tomorrow perhaps."

It is an unexpected opening gambit. Should I introduce myself? It seems unnecessary. Should I declare my purpose? He already knows it. All I can think of are bad lines from bad movies, something like 'it will make you the most celebrated writer in America....and you will die for it.'

"Jack...", I stammer.

"Yes, it's too bad about Jack. He's a nice boy. But if you're going to be in this business, you've got to accept the occupational hazards."

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I can not be sure if it is a warning or a threat.

Knowing nothing else to do, I launch off into a sincere, straightforward statement of purpose, wishing I were given more to patient playful circularity. I am not sure enough to try. You can tell me all, Mr. Persaud, I want to say. I am the author, no ordinary newsman. I will not publish for several years. I restrain the impulse, sensing the news connections from America are the things which impress him. (Later he will mention that V.S. Naipaul drops by from time to time and leaves his books. "But I have not read them.") My final sentence falls naturally into a question.

"Don't ask me any direct questions, chief," he retorts.

I know little else to do. There are so many questions, left unanswered. I hardly know where to begin. Somehow, we get going. He answers nothing. He suggests rather than declares, using riddles and rhetorical questions to imply the most delicious secret knowledge. How do you explain one-half million dollars in crisp notes found in Jonestown, without the smallest notation (he asks, as if I am supposed to answer.) of their existence? How could it be that a community of Americans was up there dealing with the Russians, spouting socialist rhetoric, without FBI and CIA infiltrating the place at the highest levels?

"Did the CIA infiltrate Jonestown," I ask.

"No direct questions, please," he responds.

And he was given to grandiose pronouncements. "Jim Jones may have been a rat and a Communist, but he was no fool. He made complete asses out of everyone he met. Jim Jones did what the entire U.S. government with all its power, could not do: he succeeded in breaking up the Guyana-U.S.S.R. friendship."

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Gradually, it dawns on me why this old man had so terrified the Time reporter. Persaud had not told the full story of Jonestown at all. He had merely suggested the shadow of the horror. He had walked the underside of terror bravely, (in a tyranny,) because he was used to the underside of things. He had played out Conrad's game in real life. To terrorize was not to tell all, but to suggest all sparingly, and so to leave great play for the imagination. It had been Jim Jones's talent too. He was frightening, because he seemed to know everything; he seemed to control all, and he worked hard to maintain a brilliant illusion.

But curiously, for me, Persaud's games do nothing but frustrate me, and they soon become irritating. I am not open to illusions solely, though I recognize that they may be sufficient to make a good book. I want to know all. It is the historian competing with the novelist. I want to treat history as a novel, but not the novel as history. The facts are important to me. I am a sifter of fact, but I must have something to sift. The illusion is not enough.

I will see Persaud several more times. When I go, I will stand in line, as he holds court for others: the Brazilian Ambassador ("Don't ask me about Jones's stay in Brazil in 1962-63, chief," he will say), a Canadian diplomat, the head of the local Muslim sect. Their tones are always hushed as I approach, and they leave quickly after I appear. In the year before the apocalypse, Temple members had been part of Persaud's court. They would often come and spin their tales of conspiracy and harassment. I can hear him listening patiently, ever pushing back his obstreperous forelock, and joking with them. In the wake, he had spoken for over five hours to the three who had escaped alive from Jonestown, including Michael Prokes, and he would say, he had gotten

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to the bottom of the story. But he too declines to write it, not just now anyway, perhaps later. Someday, he promises, he will write it up, make just a few copies, and send me one, but of course, he never does.

A year and a half later, I am at the F.B.I. in Washington, sifting through thousands of Temple documents, and I come upon a memorandum to Jones that arrests my attention. It is dated May 19, 1978, six months before the end, and it is a report from an aide on a meeting with "the pundit" of Georgetown. It is vintage Paul---I could think of him affectionately by that time: humor, innuendo, suggestions of inside information, fatherly advice, contradictions, cynicism, grace.

"Paul Persaud is 65," the document read. "We asked if would come to dinner sometime, and he wondered how we know he loves to eat. He doesn't drink, by the way, but says he has a reputation for being a drunk because he makes offhanded humorous remarks and shakes his head while he talks. I think he could be a good source of info, because he's been around for a long time." The aide obviously didn't know him well enough yet.

"Said he's gotten negative stuff on us, but says the Prime Minister likes us. There's a fine line between character and reputation, he said, and in our case, we have good character and a bad reputation....." Persaud did not know them very well either. "....but anyone who has a reputation for being progressive, productive, and humanitarian, is going to make enemies, and we are the victims of human behavior. He wondered if JJ comes to town, because he would like to meet him, but he didn't seem interested in going to Jonestown. That's for young people, he said.

"I made some confusing comment about the CIA, and Persaud said the Prime Minister asked him once how he could be sure that Persaud wasn't CIA. Since he worked as a stringer for Time magazine, he said it was

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tough to deny.

"Well, chief," Persaud answered, 'journalists and Prime Ministers are always the prime suspects, aren't they?'

"The Prime Minister had simply smiled."

Who was to know anymore if that was an accurate account of the Persaud conversation? Where did the real truth lie in any of this? The argot of Georgetown had suited Jim Jones perfectly, It had also suited perfectly the form of the non-fiction novel.