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Matthew Thompson — *My Colombian Death*
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The imperatives of daily reporting for mainstream publications — standardised frameworks and patterns, the isolation of facts and events — can be limiting. Many journalists who have deemed conventional forms and methods of news journalism inadequate for their purposes, have turned to literary reportage and in doing so, have broken new ground or advanced the practice of journalism in some way.

Returning from a trip to China and Japan after World War II, John Hersey wrote an article for *The New Yorker* that differed from any previous war coverage, telling as it did the story from the victims' point of view. Not only did Hersey interview victims, he interviewed the enemy — 'Hiroshima' was later published as a book. The work of George Orwell, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion, among others, has illustrated how subjectivity can be a route to knowledge and understanding.

Australian Matthew Thompson's first book was borne of the frustration he felt working as a journalist in Sydney and having to simplify complex situations. He describes dealing with unwritten protocols to avoid pictures from poor countries that may depress readers or stereotype developing nations, and exclude news from locations unfamiliar to many (p. 4).

His inability to tell so many stories leads to a deepening unhappiness with his life, despite being married to a woman he loves and having a baby on the way. He resigns from his job as a *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter "where I make the world beyond Australia palatable and digestible for newspaper readers" (p. 3) in order to travel and experience a world where "tension is wired through all aspects of life, the drama shaping everything from what people murmur to their lovers to how they brave the streets" (p. 5). He leaves his wife and newborn daughter in Sydney to spend close to six months travelling through, as the subtitle of the book tells us, South America's most violent country. His purpose, ostensibly, is to test his nerve, courage, desires and limits in order to know himself.

The reader does get to know a side of the author, but this is hardly the point of the book. As fate would have it, the American-born, and Sydney-raised, Thompson could have spent his formative years in Colombia, his Spanish-speaking father's company offering him a posting when the country was in its "first decade of a communist insurgency which, forty years on, has evolved into a grab bag of armed conflicts, all sides now driven as much by the enormous

profits of cocaine as by ideology". (p. 5) Thompson's family ultimately moved to the much safer Sydney. It is at the age of 35 that Thompson travels to Colombia with rudimentary Spanish and a litany of warnings from those who know better, most of which he proceeds to ignore.

Through reportage, Thompson moves away from political principles and the arguably objective truth about Colombia — the incompetence of the government, the drug economy, the conflicts between the paramilitaries, the army and the guerrillas — and gives us the powerful subjectivity of personal experience. Meeting a security expert in Manila before flying to Miami in the US and then on to Colombia, Thompson is forced to engage with the reality of travelling to a country that "boasted the most kidnappings of any country in the world. Estimates have upwards of 3000 people held at any one time" (p. 11). Aside from the dangers of being kidnapped, the security expert explains how to avoid being killed, because in Colombia "there are so many reasons to kill". (p. 12) His main advice is to avoid routine behaviour. Thompson is also told never to start a fight, how to know when you are being watched, never to walk at a regular speed, not to ask penetrating questions, to always limit angles of access, to change hotels often, to stay away from drugs, and not to drink in public.

Yet by heeding such advice, Thompson would never have experienced Colombia as so many Colombians do. The book is undoubtedly informed by the central journalistic commitment to truth. Thompson has done his research regarding the history and current status of the guerrilla groups, the drug cartels and the official Colombian armed forces. (Some editing mistakes are still apparent — Pablo Neruda is Chilean, not Peruvian (p. 6) — but this is a quibble.) But by completely immersing himself in the story and leaving the measured voice of classic journalism behind, the author's narrative presence adds so much more to the story of present-day Colombia, the quality of Thompson's testimony enabling the reader to learn as much about human nature as civil war.

Thompson finds the over-protectiveness of Colombians is "driving him crazy", as is their insistence on telling him their country is the most beautiful he will ever see, despite the inescapable poverty. The desperation of many he meets seems to wash over him at times, until he is forced to personalise it, as when he encounters a young deaf-mute girl who, after having begged food, mimes his bag being snatched and pushes it up underneath his arm. He wishes "I could also bathe her, dose her with antibiotics and offer her sanctuary. She is so painfully individual now, so distinct from the continuum of hard times which swallows her again as I stride the alley". (p. 78)

The sister of Thompson's Sydney-based Colombian friend casually mentions a guard who lost his job after falling asleep during his shift. (p. 42) Thompson asks if it was the night shift to be told that there is only one shift in Colombia, 24 hours. He sees a woman, one of many, who has walked on her knees with her baby in her arms so the child can be blessed in church. He attends a corralejas, involving hundreds of men taunting a bull in an arena; takes a lot of cocaine; meets, after weeks of negotiation via both official and unofficial channels, Salvatore Mancuso, the commander in chief of an underground army and head of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (Colombia United Self Defence or AUC), and boxes with a gangster. In many instances the reader is left wondering how Thompson was ever able to escape the country without being kidnapped. Throughout it all, we are privy to what is, for so many people, daily life in a country run by a drug economy.

Towards the end of the book Thompson takes a hallucinogenic drug called *yage* and thinks he has died. Recovering hours later, he decides to take it again so he can be sure of going home with integrity, "as someone who has awakened from the sleep of a convenient and dully

gratifying life" (p. 316). And the reader is reminded that he can, and of course does, go home.

A compelling, evocative and beautifully written book that shows civil war as a cruelty inflicted on individuals, this sustained investigation illustrates the dimensions of actuality in Colombia that conventional reporting so often avoids.

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