PAGE-TURNER

JANET MALCOLM, REMEMBERED BY WRITERS

Notes on Malcolm's legacy, from writers at and outside The New Yorker.

By The New Yorker

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When I started out as a magazine writer, Janet Malcolm was my idol. She still is.

The writer's job is, in the immortal words of Howard Cosell, to "tell it like it is." In her writing, Janet is always completely focussed on understanding what is really going on. She is also completely unsentimental. She is uninterested in flattering her subjects or her readers. She pulls the cover off. Even when she is describing, she is dissecting. I feel that this is what you want magazine writing to do.

At the same time, Janet knew that seeing things the way they really are is, ultimately, impossible. One of her great themes is transference. This is the explicit subject of her first book, "Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession," but it is also the basis for the dynamic she describes in "The Journalist and the Murderer." Transference is what makes all relationships, including the writer's relationship with her subject, so conflicted, and what makes "telling it like it is" so difficult. We carry our psychic baggage into every encounter. We can't help it. We take sides. We cathect.

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I first met Janet long ago, when I was working in an office at N.Y.U., and we were both members of an outfit there called the New York Institute for the Humanities. We were chatting one day at one of the institute's lunches, and she asked if she

could visit me in my office. I said, only half jestingly, "Of course, as long as you promise never to describe it in one of your pieces." She looked at me with the widest eyes, and said, "Whatever do you mean?" I thought, Uh-oh. This really is Janet Malcolm.

But we got through it. I had just begun writing for *The New Yorker*—this was thirty years ago—and she was very encouraging. No writer's interest in my writing has meant more to me than hers—as much, maybe, but never more. For me, she was the real deal. —*Louis Menand*

For some reason, in 2016, I became Janet's fact checker. Perhaps it was because I knew a lot about music—her one piece that year was a Profile of the pianist Yuja Wang—though that didn't have much to do with what came later. The first time we met, she was wearing a large green hat and a smile so bland I was sure she wasn't interested in me, but it soon became clear that she was interested in everything. Two years later, when she called me " 'scrupulous' " (it was by e-mail, so the scare quotes stood out), I was happy to be mocked. If journalism really is morally indefensible, as she wrote at the start of "The Journalist and the Murderer," then fact-checking her pieces could only be absurd, and, though I didn't believe it, I was grateful for the thought. Checking her was like being shut in with a leopard: she was entrancing, variegated, prone to pounce. I'll miss that feeling dearly. —*Fergus McIntosh*

In 2004, after Gardner Botsford, Janet Malcolm's editor (and husband) died, Janet said to me, "Now it's just us." I had been working with Janet and Gardner for years, and, although Gardner hadn't come to the office for some time, he was definitely there, behind the scenes, with his pencil and his editorial acuity. So this

signalled a new, different, slightly nerve-racking responsibility. Mostly we worked by sending manuscripts and proofs back and forth, by e-mail or by FedEx, with queries and changes or fixes in brackets or colors, and sometimes talking on the phone. Janet was a small, quiet, shy-seeming person, always wearing something covetously beautiful—a scarf, a jacket, a hat, or shoes—when she came into the office to close a piece, but there was something intimidating about her, too. She had an iron will and an unyielding self-assurance. Although she would ask for your opinion and appear to consider your queries and suggestions, and even agree with some, she almost never went along with them; once a piece had its basic structure and plot, it was set in her mind. Not that she didn't revise or fuss with sentences or paragraphs, but she knew what she wanted from the start. She sometimes expressed doubt, but really I think she had no doubt.

A very small-scale example: in a piece from 2007 about Allen Shawn's book "Wish I Could Be There: Notes from a Phobic Life," she wrote, "Shawn returns to the subject [mortality] in a poetic passage that suddenly and for no apparent reason floats into a late chapter and takes on the weight of a vatic message." This sentence was followed by the note "Ann: is there a better word than 'float'?" I sent her some suggestions, and she responded: "Dear Ann, thanks so much for your excellent suggestions. I found that 'floats' didn't seem bad on another reading."

When she did have to make a change, for fact-checking reasons, say, she often came up not with the obvious or simple fix (such as cutting the troublesome fact) but with an elegant solution that got around the problem in a completely unexpected way. If she didn't get it right the first time, or wasn't satisfied, she persisted until she did; I got many e-mails headed "revise of the revise."

And her gentle appearance was not really deceptive: Janet was kind and warm and funny and generous, and I think grateful, too, whether she accepted an editorial suggestion or not. Here is Janet's e-mail voice making a correction to a sentence in one of her Gertrude Stein pieces:

Flanner was also privy to Toklas's remarkable idea that [as a Catholic] she would be reunited in Heaven with Stein, who, as a genius, had been spared the fate of her fellow plain-dead Jews and was waiting for her there. (The non-genius Toklas had to make do with the mechanisms for eternal life open to ordinary observant Catholics.)

Ann: I've removed "as a Catholic." The nuttiness is the part about the Jewish Stein going to Heaven. It is not nutty to think that Catholics go to Heaven, right?

—Ann Goldstein

I grew up in a family where the names of *New Yorker* writers were tossed around with a proprietary air. "*That* Ian Frazier," my mom might say, or "*that* Janet Malcolm." The writers were always "very good," and I assumed that reading their work would be like eating vegetables that made you feel smart afterward. By the time I was in college, I was reading *The New Yorker*, but only for its poetry and fiction. One day, I phoned home and was apprised of a "very good" article by "*that* Janet Malcolm." The piece was called "Iphigenia in Forest Hills." I looked it up because I liked the title.

In the first few sentences of "Iphigenia," a defense attorney stuns a courtroom in which a woman is being tried for murder by announcing that his client wishes to testify on her own behalf. The defendant, Mazoltuv Borukhova, is "a small, thin woman of arresting appearance." She is dressed "in a mannish black jacket and a floor-length black skirt," and her "long, dark, tightly curled hair" is "bound by a red cord." No one had warned me that the scene, the language, would be so instantly mesmerizing. Malcolm's command was absolute; noting the potential energy of the coiled hair, tied by a red string, I remember feeling a sort of panic, as if I'd come to an exam unprepared. She went on. The lead prosecutor was "a short, plump man with a mustache, who walks with the darting movements of a bantam

cock." An essence had been pinned to the page; and yet the representation seemed almost too concisely lifelike to describe a real person. The effect was eerie. Then, as I was wondering just what it was that Malcolm had captured, she suddenly appeared to start wondering the same thing. Observations about the deceptive "spell" of storytelling began to cut through her narration of the trial. The lawyers, she wrote, were spinning ambiguous evidence into "tales of guilt or innocence." The article itself, I realized, was structured in fragments, as if it were coming apart.

Since then, I've equated Malcolm with a mastery so total that it can only start undoing what it has made. The more intimate tributes from Malcolm's friends and colleagues have been deeply moving. She seems generous, acute, kind. I do, however, want to speak briefly for those of Malcolm's readers (and I believe there are many of us) whose discovery of her work coincided with our discovery of what nonfiction might be capable of. I'm not sure that Malcolm would wish this discovery to be an entirely happy one. By demonstrating what writing can do, she perhaps demonstrates what people, with their blurred edges and inconsistencies, cannot do. And yet she pulls it off wonderfully; she is, was, very good, but she was also unmatchable. —*Katy Waldman*

It is rare for an essayist of superior intellect and superior style never to outshine or overshadow her subjects; Janet Malcolm did neither. All her life, she directed her calm, amused, fearsomely perceptive gaze outward, to art, to literature, to people, and under her unsettling scrutiny they started to tremble and glow. In her criticism, commonplace artifacts—a half-broken chair in David Salle's studio, a loose photograph of Virginia Woolf and her unhappy family—were transformed into enchanted objects, and dry-as-dust ideas caught fire. The tawdriest novel was revealed to contain astonishing and comical moral depths. A crooked dress, a rude

remark, an unbalanced gesture, a tale told twice and told differently—from these incongruities, she could unravel the story of a life, and she did so with immense intellectual gravity, with a profound sense for the dramatic tension between revelation and concealment, intimacy and loneliness. Her last piece for this magazine, on Susan Sontag, closes with the impossibility of being reconciled to one's own death. "She was the smartest girl in the class, but she couldn't figure out why she—we—had to die," she wrote. Lacking the answer herself, Malcolm turned her attention back to life—its suffering, its brevity—and to the terrible injustice that when we die, the story of who we were and what we did passes from our hands into the hands of strangers. Yet for all the brutality of existence, the lives glimpsed through Malcolm's words remained radiant to their—and her—end. —*Merve Emre*

I never met Janet Malcolm—by the time I joined the magazine, she was not just semi-emeritus but semi-canonical—but I once spent a summer as the junior-most worker at a university press and was given the job of proofreading her forthcoming book, a duty that struck me as privileged and intimate, though I never found a thing to change. The book was "Two Lives," her portrait of the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. It wasn't long, and it had been typeset in narrow, column-like text, probably to make it seem longer. But the writing had a strange way of filling out in the reader's imagination so that it seemed big and fully conceived, and it was dangerously engrossing from the first lines:

When I read *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* for the first time, Eisenhower was in the White House and Liz Taylor had taken Eddie Fisher away from Debbie Reynolds. The book, published in 1954, was given to me by a fellow member of a group of pretentious young persons I ran around with, who had nothing but amused contempt for middlebrow American culture,

and whose revolt against the conformity of the time largely took the form of patronizing a furniture store called Design Research and of writing mannered letters to each other modeled on the mannered letters of certain famous literary homosexuals, not then known as such.

I read those two sentences about twenty times in the office while supposedly checking endnote numbers, trying to figure out the way their magic worked. The Malcolm style has an element that is head-on, declarative, patient in detail, and syntactically tight. ("The book, published in 1954, was given to me . . .") A lot of this was typical of *The New Yorker* at the time when she began to write for it. What wasn't—what she brought on her own—was obliqueness and a refractive irony that, rather than diffusing her ideas, brought them into wider focus. Malcolm could balance these two modes, the baldly direct and the elliptically indirect, in one sentence, and that balance ultimately helped her step outside the journalistic forms she used, to hold her subject and her process equally in view. It made her weird, and often funny. Who else could take a syntactical dag of a phrase like "not then known as such" and land it as a piquant punch line? At some point, I happened to show "Two Lives" to a childhood friend whose verbal antennae were tuned to a very different wavelength—he was an ironical rapper who'd become famous for a track about franchise food—and he was as enthralled as I was. The real thing speaks for itself.

Malcolm had the reputation of an ungenerous portraitist. "Two Lives" suggested, among other things, that Stein was an egomaniacal, preposterously lazy writer. Generosity, though, takes many forms. "Two Lives" is not a major Malcolm book —most readers start with "The Journalist and the Murderer" or "In the Freud Archives"—which is why its quality, line by line, was so captivating, an unexpected gift you couldn't help but unwrap. One of Malcolm's persistent targets was the occluding vanities and tendentious narratives of the journalism profession, and part of what clearly irked her was writers putting their habits of production before the reader's interests. In her own work, she took more time and care than the job required. She unstingily flecked in delightful bits of the world ("patronizing a

furniture store called Design Research"), tried to bridge the border between written life and real life, and was candid about the Heisenbergian indeterminacy of her measurements as a reporter. There's no greater feat for a nonfiction writer than inventing a way of seeing and saying which reveals constellations of meaning previously invisible, but Malcolm did that, again and again. She was supremely generous in the one relationship that matters for a writer, the one with the reader. It's a relationship—she knew as a student of text herself—that can outlast any impressions formed in life. —*Nathan Heller*

Janet Malcolm was, with Joan Didion, by far the most influential literary journalist of her time—and by "literary journalist" I mean not someone who writes journalism about literature but someone who takes journalistic occasions to make literature happen. She was a writer above all else. Even those of us who might have disagreed with her particular take on a subject—on the wholeheartedness of her allegiance to Freud, for instance—never stopped marvelling at the hypnotic hold of her pages. She remained, throughout her life, a master maker of sentences and cinematographer of scenes.

And so a moment or two spent contemplating her style seems like the right tribute to pay to her passing. Her writing was rooted in this magazine, in the reporting manner of Joseph Mitchell, who she often said was her ideal: the minimalism, the precision, the lack of show and self-conscious fuss. And it was also rooted—though she mentioned this less often— in the fifties reporting of Lillian Ross, that stinging, fly-on-the wall writing of "Picture" and the portrait of Hemingway, the ability to be both friendly and fierce.

Yet her materials were, uniquely, those of the formidable middle-European intellectual that, by birth and upbringing, she clandestinely remained. It is perhaps too pat, though not false, to say that her achievement was to combine the manner

of Mitchell and Ross with the material of a George Steiner or Hannah Arendt. She helped pull the thinking brow of this magazine up without altering the fluidity of its writing fingers. And, perhaps more than any other writer of her time, including Didion, she was self-consciously attuned to the great postmodernist turn that raged in our era. Her Profile of the painter David Salle, for instance, was a masterpiece of adapting her style to a subject—in this case, to Salle's own fragmentary, episodic, hugely "meta" aesthetic. It must be one of the most influential profiles of the past thirty or forty years.

In her later years, nothing was more moving than her pieces about the vanishing New York of émigré culture: the irreplaceable Argosy bookstore and its three Cohen sister owners, for instance, or her piece on a broadcaster on the classical-music station WQXR. In that last piece, she wrote of "the pride that my father and his fellow-émigrés took in their ability to stroll through the language as if it were a field of wildflowers from which they could gather choice specimens." Her strolls through the language helped change it. —*Adam Gopnik*

When I'm stuck—and I'm stuck all the time—I look at "Forty-one False Starts," Janet Malcolm's Profile of the artist David Salle. The piece is a strange paean to the fact of journalistic fallibility. You will never capture a subject's real likeness. There are too many possible beginnings to choose from, too many ways to write a sentence, to disclose a detail or share an observation, and settling on one possibility forecloses all the others. But Malcolm found a way not to choose—to admit to her limitations in a way that transformed them into something wonderful, something unique, and she did it with so much style and intelligence that the rest of us can only put our pencils down and call it a day. It is a triumph disguised as failure, and the performance of the piece is unrepeatable: like the writer who wrote it, one of a kind. —*Alexandra Schwartz*

There are certain people for whom a first name doesn't quite suffice, even in the minds of their friends. It feels obscene to claim Janet Malcolm as a friend. She *was* one, but I was never able to think of her as just "Janet." She was always her full name in my mind. I've never met a person (or read the work of a person) who was so assuredly herself. Her brilliant books are nearly most amazing for what they leave out, which is everything that didn't interest her. There was nothing dutiful in her writing: if she didn't care about some element of a story, she just didn't include it. She was this way in person, too, growing quiet when a conversation turned in a direction she found boring. "You can scarcely believe such people exist!" was a line I heard her say multiple times, in reference to figures she found foolish. Such a dignified and damning way of expressing distaste: doubting someone's very existence.

Her self-assurance had a way of making life seem so straightforward. A little more than a year ago, I was telling her about the book I was writing, wringing my hands about various people who wouldn't talk to me. Her advice was simple: "Forget about them. Just write about the people who *will* talk to you. That's what I do." It felt like a revelation. Similarly, when I invited her to attend a lecture that was going to be held near her house, she replied, "Dear Alice, thanks for thinking of me, but I don't think so. xxxJ" I'm not sure if I've ever received a more inspiring or instructive e-mail.

This all makes her sound austere, but she wasn't. She was sneakily very funny, loved to gossip, and was fascinated by fashion magazines—delighted by their absurdity. When she found out I had met the owners of a Maine summer house that once belonged to the psychoanalyst Kurt Eissler (a character in "In the Freud Archives"), she grilled me for details about them. One afternoon, over tea, I showed her how to use emojis, and she was thrilled at the prospect of sending a horse to her granddaughter, whom she spoke of lovingly all the time. She was

reserved and intimidating, but when she was charmed by something it really showed.

Janet—I'll try to drop the last name, though it feels strange—wrote my favorite books I've ever read. It was a privilege to know her, and I wish she were still here. I'll miss her a lot. —*Alice Gregory*

There's a line in the first paragraph of "A Girl of the Zeitgeist," Janet Malcolm's Profile of Ingrid Sischy, where she describes the formidable interior of the art critic Rosalind Krauss's apartment: "Each piece of furniture and every object of use or decoration has evidently had to pass a severe test before being admitted into this disdainfully interesting room." Malcolm identifies her own interest not merely in what is on display but in what is not, in everything that has been "found wanting," all of the regular pedestrian items that Krauss has summoned the strength to refuse. Malcolm continues, "No one can leave this loft without feeling a little rebuked: one's own house suddenly seems cluttered, inchoate, banal."

Malcolm had to have known that this had the ring of self-portraiture. She couldn't help but notice the clumsy ways in which we reveal whatever it is we find darkly wanting about ourselves. In some of her later work, it's clear that her subjects understood, if helplessly, what they had got themselves into. No one is capable of exercising the kind of self-control that could entirely banish the expression of private vanity, weakness, clutter, banality. There is a scene in a Profile of Eileen Fisher where Fisher realizes, to her obvious dismay, that her attempt to exile one of her house cats has been seized upon by Malcolm as a minor sign of some obscure character flaw. Fisher repeats her justifications—that, although the cat lives outside, he remains the healthiest of her cats—but she seems to realize that even her defensiveness has given something away. A few years ago, Malcolm and I met for a coffee at a bakery near her home. As we sat down, I made an idle,

pointless remark about how I'd passed the particular establishment for years and had never gone inside. I knew, even before I finished speaking, that I was saying something just to say something. Malcolm, fully in character, made no attempt to hide her puzzlement. "That's strange," she said, and paused. "It only opened a week ago." —*Gideon Lewis-Kraus*

So much of Janet Malcolm's work lives permanently in my mind. But the book that I return to, again and again, is "The Silent Woman," from 1994, which grew out of a *New Yorker* piece of the same name. The "silent woman" is the poet Sylvia Plath, though her tumultuous life is not Malcolm's subject so much as the inciting incident for a grand exploration of biographical writing. As with most of Malcolm's work, the book is a delicate but dizzying seesaw ride: Malcolm believed that biographical writing is, at its core, an unethical, "transgressive" endeavor. And yet, there she is, writing a meta-biography about a horde of Plath biographers, who attempt to squeeze the poet's kaleidoscopic existence between covers.

What Malcolm set out to find, when she started reporting, was why so many of Plath's biographers found themselves at bitter loggerheads with both Plath's widower, Ted Hughes, and his fussbudget sister, Olwyn, who tightly guarded the Hughes/Plath estate. The biographers, Malcolm found, were wholly unsympathetic to Hughes, blaming him for Plath's depression and even for her death. Malcolm makes clear that she believes this a reductive conclusion ("A person who dies at thirty in the middle of a messy separation remains forever fixed in the mess," she wrote), but she avoids tidy judgment. What keeps me coming back to "The Silent Woman" is that, every single time I read it, my sympathies waver. I find myself warming to Hughes's cause, then to Plath's, and then I hear Malcolm's stern voice telling me that choosing sides is exactly the kind of behavior that she distrusts. The joy of the book lies in watching her puzzle through the big questions, asking whether she should be poking around in another woman's secrets

at all, constantly implicating herself while pushing ahead. Her roiling self-examination was its own kind of poetic pursuit. —*Rachel Syme*

Janet Malcolm belonged to a realm of writers that I aspire to be part of and assume I'll never join. I said to her once, "You are a writer I read to learn from," which is an embarrassingly earnest thing to say, but I admired her, and it was true. Besides, when praise is genuine, why stint on it? Her thinking was precise and of an exceptionally high order. She had an ability to find an intriguing line of words to fit her intriguing and almost always singular line of thinking. She was also mischievous and liked to make a kind of smackdown assertion—a signature trait, as anyone who has read "The Journalist and the Murderer" knows. In that book, by writing about a particular set of circumstances she had made them general, and she had made them signify ideas.

She was small and fine-boned. I saw her once on the subway, and among the rest of us her fragility was startling. She looked like a slight and elegant figure among the brutes. She had a wide face and eyes that looked directly into yours. I saw her expression as estimating, and I was always a little afraid of her, but I don't know if I should have been. Her manner was a little severe, though, so that I always felt I hadn't read enough or learned enough to begin a conversation that she might be interested in having.

I met her in 1975, when I was twenty-three and a policeman in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, and she and her husband, Gardner Botsford, were visiting her sister Marie Winn and Winn's husband, Allan Miller, at a house, in the Truro woods, that Winn and Miller had rented. The house was on Horseleech Pond, just back of the ocean and the dunes, in the heart of the Cape Cod National Seashore, and secluded, in the midst of pine and oak woods. I met Allan and

Marie that summer, liked them very much, and was in the habit of showing off by driving the police car into the woods to visit them. One time when I did, Janet and Gardner were there. There is a sort of commemorative photograph of that summer in which everyone is lined up, yearbook style, outside the house, and I in my police uniform am a type of prop. I wish I had it now, but I've lost it.

It is impossible to imagine when we are young who we will become if we live a long and interesting and, in Malcolm's case, consequential life, of the effects of decades of reading and looking and conversation. A person as exceptional as Malcolm was something like an archive of sensibility and thought, one that is irreplaceable, and when such a person dies it is, as John Updike said, of William Maxwell, as if a library has burned. People such as Malcolm, who appear to be so much themselves, are rare and inspiring, and the loss of such a person is an impoverishment. —*Alec Wilkinson*

Like being irradiated, like cleaning your filthy glasses, like plunging your bloated brain in cool water, like watching the pure fundamental geometry of social presentation and deception be revealed for the first time by a manipulative and absolutely unerring god. Every time I read "Forty-one False Starts" I want to run around and scream, remembering what's possible. —*Jia Tolentino*

Upon hearing the news of Janet Malcolm's death, the first thing I did was cry. The second thing I did was search my e-mail to find out when we were last in touch—too many months ago, in the first wave of the pandemic—and then to read through some of the messages she'd sent over the years. Generous words, amused words, helpful words. I'd had to cancel a lunch we'd scheduled because of a domestic crisis: my cat had gone missing, days before I was due to move houses.

Janet, a cat lover, offered advice—had I tried putting up flyers? She'd done that many times in similar situations. "They are completely unpredictable. Many scenarios are possible," the e-mail read. One of her own cats had been trapped for several days inside a neighbor's empty house—reduced, she assumed, to sustaining itself by drinking from the toilet. "It sometimes takes them a long time to get back from some stupid irresistible adventure," she wrote: the perfect conjunction of adjectives.

I knew Janet as a byline long before I knew her as a colleague. I moved to New York to go to journalism school just a few months before "The Journalist and the Murderer" was published; and I read it, as we all did then, with the shock of the new. As a personage, on the page, she was daunting: fiercely smart, relentlessly analytic, with a cool precision in her turn of phrase. I could have skipped J-school and just read Janet instead. And, in fact, reading her work has been a career-long education: in piece after piece, she offered an ongoing lesson in how to listen, what to listen for, and how to build an unassailable structure. She was in every respect daunting.

As a colleague, though, she was immensely warm and supportive. One of the peculiarities and strengths of an institution like *The New Yorker* is its intergenerational breadth, with the possibility of friendship and enlightenment extending across the decades. In her eighties, Janet could be as excited by the work of colleagues in their twenties as they were dazzled by her storied accomplishments. The acute openness and receptivity that characterized her stance as a reporter also informed her generous approach as a colleague, and in that respect, as in so much else, she was an indelible inspiration. When my missing cat returned the day after our cancelled lunch, I took a photo of my gleeful son lying beside her as she slept off her stupid irresistible adventure, then e-mailed it to Janet. "His lovely smile tells the story," she wrote back. "And her all tuckered out pose sort of tells hers." How terrible it is to lose Janet, with her peerless capacity for seeing the story, and for telling it. —*Rebecca Mead*

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